

## Someone Else

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# Someone Else

by [obeyingthemuse](#)

## Summary

Canon takes a brick in the face by the name of Carver Hawke.

Or: The “modern character in Thedas” trope done a *liiiiittle* differently. Maker have mercy on us all.

Or: I can't find a fic where the transmigrated modern character in Thedas actually *massively changes* canon from DAO to DAI, so I write it myself.

## Notes

Carver is an unreliable narrator, as he only shares what he notices and deems important for us to know. We won't get all that is happening around him, or all of what he's thinking. Prepare to read between the lines, hehe.

The changes will be slow at first, so bear with me. At the end of the day, my intention is to see how thoroughly someone can shatter canon while still making the timeline easy to follow. Enjoy the ride!

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Now with a [TV Tropes](#) page. I'm staggered by everyone's support. Thank you!

X

Edit: I've received a few questions regarding Someone Else's sexuality, and honestly they're still a little too messed up inside to approach that question. I still don't know if I'm going to pair them with anyone. That said, if you're uncomfortable with LGBTQ themes, this fic might not be for you. I mean, it's Dragon Age.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Black Sheep

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One day, Garrett accidentally broke a plate.

He shrugged with a helpless smile. “Bethany suddenly grabbed my ankle. She surprised me.”

Leandra scolded her son. “Bethany is my baby girl, don’t you blame her.” The young mother picked up her only daughter and held her against her chest. The distracted toddler, already forgetting the brief exchange, giggled and hugged her mother back, playing with Leandra’s hair. Bethany’s twin sat on the ground with his small wooden toy and silently watched the girls of the Hawke family disappear to the next room to check on the laundry.

Garrett scuffed his foot with a mutter. “Mother coddles her too much.”

Garrett was six years old and learning. He had gone from being the only mage child to not even the only mage, and was coming to the realisation that sharing his parents’ attention was a reality he’d have to commit to for longer than he realised. For the rest of his life, in fact. “Forever” was a shapeless impression difficult to grasp for a six-year-old.

Carver’s existence didn’t help any. When Malcolm returned home from trading in the market, he scooped up the youngest male addition to the family and bounced him on his knee.

“You know why I named you Carver, my boy?” That was a term previously exclusive to Garrett. “I named you after the brave and open-minded man who saved my life. I know you’ll grow up to be just like him.”

The Hawke children would quickly forget these events when they’d grow older. Bethany would view her family as good as the goodness shown to her when she was little, even as Bethany couldn’t place why she expected to be treated well. Garrett would find meaning in his magic, an attribute in which Malcolm saw parallels between his own talent as a young mage with Garrett’s even greater potential, drawing the Hawke patriarch’s attention while Garrett couldn’t explain why he was pleased by it, only that it was expected. Carver would be shaped

by his present more than his past - a grey space in his memory where nothing stood out except everyone else in his family. He would forget the significance of his name, except that he was meant to be brave and open-minded even though he inwardly didn't feel deserving of being called either.

Such was the natural progression of youth.

If only Carver wasn't fated to be the black sheep of the family.

Because in the first month of his life, Carver had rolled over in his sleep as a babe and breathed his last, before someone else breathed in. Someone else had their own name, their own family, their own forgettable childhood. Someone else was always the first to step forward and apologise in the family, and hated it, but hated tension in the family more. Someone else desired to be their own person without the shackles of expectation - to be the "kind one," and then to be nothing - and believed that if given the chance at a second life, a fraction more of their potential would at least shine through.

Someone else was miserable to be reduced to the youngest son of another person's family.

Carver was a quiet boy, always watching and observing. He was, in fact, the only one to do so, and thus no one in the Hawke family shared the note of their neighbours that Carver was Quiet For His Age. Or the note of the neighbourhood children that Carver was Weird. Or the note of the local Chantry sisters that Carver was unusually Dedicated to Learning of the Maker.

When Carver displayed interest in the Templars' lifestyle, however, the Hawke family noticed and intervened.

"I'll support whatever path you take," Malcolm Hawke said, "except this one."

Carver was more than just Carver. "Who did you name me after, father?"

"Ser Maurevar Carver," Malcolm returned without missing a beat. "Someone you aren't ready to be yet. You're still young, my boy."

So Carver took up the way of the wooden sword and practised it in Lothering's backyard, where Malcolm didn't bring his mage children to practice and where everyone else's children noted that Carver was Not Good Enough to be a Templar, and laughed. The Chantry sisters

told Carver that the Maker had a path for everyone, and his could equally be serving his family in a capacity yet unseen, or setting an example for them by still pursuing the Templar order when he grew older. The local Knight-Captain knew that Carver was More Hard-Working than Half the Bloody Recruits and promised him a place in the order if the time came, but explicitly stated that it wasn't a man's place to get between a father's decision and a son, and that Carver would ultimately have to work out his own way to the order before he'd be able to claim it.

Carver didn't mind. He'd look back on his earliest years as a Hawke and tell himself he didn't mind, compared to what followed.

The prettiest girl of Lothering decided to claim him as her friend.

Pretty, in the sense of her face. For everything else reminded Carver too strongly of a family who always thought they were right, and even then they still loved their own unconditionally. Peaches only shared the former similarity. Peaches was an inescapable existence that Carver could grow to tolerate like one could come to accept a rock in their shoe.

"I'm Carver's friend."

Malcolm and Leandra Hawke smiled and nodded at the girl at the front door, and shot Carver a raised brow paired with the smile tilting and gaining meaning. Already, due to Peaches' face, people whose opinions Carver cared about were misunderstanding.

"You're a very pretty girl, my dear," Leandra greeted and bent down to Peaches' height. "Why are you here for Carver?"

"We're supposed to play in the woods together," Peaches replied, unaware of herself, of the misunderstandings that rippled in her wake. "Carver was late. The boys are wondering where he is."

Carver intervened. "I don't play with you." He swung his wooden sword in the town's outskirts, and the rest of the kids would watch or jab at him with a stick to evoke a reaction, like he was a stray cat. Peaches included. When she did, the boys were more motivated to imitate her, and pushed Carver around.

If Carver were to claim a friend out of anyone who would have been in primary school where he was from, it would be the children who were already promised to the Templars. They regularly studied in the abbey - not just the Chant of Light, but the history of the Chantry at

its best and worst, and what it meant to be the same Chantry's firm hand in the realm of magic and demons. Those children teased and played like the children they were, but they were also aware of their life's solemn purpose and, due to their forcibly maturing hearts, never stepped too far in their jests. Indeed, the worst infraction they could commit against the Chantry Mother was to fall asleep during lessons. Carver and them often crossed paths between the Chantry and the Templar salles, and had developed an amiability over time. Before Malcolm and Leandra had banned Carver from the Templar grounds, Carver had sparred with them when he could.

Leandra scolded him, observing only his words. "Carver!" She turned to Peaches. "My son is stubborn, as all boys are. You two have fun."

Carver didn't want to train in the woods - not now that Peaches had deemed herself his escort, and that Malcolm and Leandra would think poorly of him if he further expressed disinterest in Peaches. As if he had an obligation to any pretty girl they saw. Yet he left with Peaches anyway, then ditched her with her usual clique of girls. He spent the rest of the day in the Chantry.

Garrett laughed. "I heard from Father that you ran away from a girl."

Bethany wasn't laughing. "I heard you made her cry."

"Peaches is used to getting her way," Carver pointed out. "She didn't even notice I had left her side until an hour into chatting with the girls."

"Father had to pause our magic lessons to apologise to Peaches' father," Bethany shared. She was conveying the perceived gravity of Carver's mistake.

"From what I heard of her short memory, Peaches will get over it," Garrett reasoned. "Just don't make any more girls cry, brother." Garrett was telling Carver not to disrupt the mage children's time with their father.

Carver thought of the Templars, of their lessons, and of the quiet words Malcolm and Leandra would impart with him when the amiable Garrett would lose his temper on Carver without warning, or when the usually brave Bethany would hold tightly to the family and confess she was scared of the dark. The Hawke mages *felt* strongly. They feared, hated, and *loved* strongly. Which was why Leandra and Carver had to step forward first and be the balance, to strongly love in return.

A firm love.

“I’m going to avoid Peaches anyway,” Carver said. “Your magic lessons should be safe.” They were important.

Unfortunately, Peaches grew determined.

She employed the voluntary assistance of the boys who sought her opinion, and cast a net over Lothering for Carver. Media entertainment didn’t exist in Thedas, and Peaches liked observing drama. She liked involving herself in the circles of secrets that children created to feel special - even if it was as inconsequential as a secret hiding place - and she was used to others feeding her whatever she asked for. Carver’s behaviour was a defiance against the accepted rule that Peaches always got her way, and the girl didn’t want her peers to catch on to the rule’s fragility. So the boys sought to locate and deliver Carver to Peaches, and Carver made a secret hiding place out of the Chantry. Even should he be found, the Chantry’s solemn interior would discourage the wildness out of his pursuers.

Carver became unusually pious.

It should have been expected with how much time he spent in the Chantry, but he still surprised himself, how faithful he was. Carver could credit the effectiveness of repeated exposure, but he also knew about dialogue trees, talent points, and save files. The world should have been small. Containable, like it could fit in a box. Yet his faith grew, pointing out that his apathy to the possible existence of a higher power hadn’t stopped it from delivering him into a second life. Carver allowed himself to call it the Maker. It was an inadequate label for something that was beyond Carver’s reach yet continuously affecting him in the most intimate level, and it wasn’t exactly the creator the Chantry described. But a verse from the Chant of Light would sometimes leap out to Carver and offer comfort, and he’d allow his heart to soften and hear the voice of the one who had given him a second chance even when he hadn’t deserved it. As possibly the only like of his kind, Carver felt less lonely.

Spending all his time in the Chantry became easier.

Peaches eventually snapped.

“I’m here for Carver,” she said, after showing up at the Hawke’s front door first thing in the morning, not giving Carver the chance to sneak past. “He’s *supposed* to—” The rest of Peaches’ declaration died when the rest of the door swung open to reveal Garrett.

Likewise, the older Hawke brother was startled by Peaches. She had fair hair like cornsilk as opposed to the Hawke family's black and blacker heads, and every strand of her hair picked up with the wind when it blew.

"I'm Garrett," he said on auto-pilot. "I don't know about Carver, but I can do it."

"I haven't said anything." Peaches was pleasantly surprised.

It didn't matter. Garrett could do everything better than Carver. It wasn't a matter of pride, just fact. "I don't feel like studying today, father. May I play?" He declared this to Malcolm, who was catching up to the door, and farther back, to Carver and Bethany who were peeking around the corner.

Carver was pleased. He could finally spend time with Bethany, his born twin and most thoughtful sibling. In a way, she could have been the other half of someone else before they had become Carver, the youngest Hawke son who didn't have to be the "kind one." Bethany also wanted to play with the less troublesome girls of the town, and Carver would happily join them.

And so it was.

Because Carver was no longer the most pleasant-looking boy that Peaches knew, which was unexpected. Garrett had indeed been the most handsome baby to be born in Lothing, but Carver hadn't translated Peaches' obsessiveness to a crush that Peaches herself hadn't understood until she was ten, and Garrett was ten, and Peaches was chasing Garrett around with less boy followers. Bethany's girl friends informed Carver as much, particularly of his symmetrical looks. They had apparently been too shy to pursue him, and by now were already interested in someone else or themselves. Carver didn't mind and let Bethany make her own friends while he spent his time subdued in the local abbey, telling himself that it would have been strange for an old soul to befriend youngsters anyway.

Peaches had trained them well.

Sometimes, Carver wished he could hate this girl, who dragged her fingers through everyone's life - even unintentionally - and left permanent evidence of her existence behind.



The dynamics of their generation didn't change for the next eight years.

Garrett swept up those around him with his charisma, easily drawing out the best of others, even Peaches. He also wielded a stick better than anyone else, which eventually became a staff - to few other's knowledge - and soon Peaches' hold on the rules of the world dissolved under Garrett's:

Namely, that Garrett could do anything the kids knew that Carver could do, and better.

That Garrett was as kind as Bethany, but more mischievous.

Which meant that Garrett was more fun than both of them combined.

Besides, Garrett was also the Hawke child who spent the most time out with people. Bethany couldn't keep up with Garrett's fast-paced studying of magic - because of course Garrett was a genius - and thus stayed home with Malcolm for more of the day than Garrett did. Carver was always in the Chantry, drawn to the Templar sparring ground but never stepping foot in it. People still liked Bethany - adored her, with her dimpled smile and genuine laughter - but oddly enough, people couldn't come to like Carver. He was persistently Weird. Swinging a sword alone and talking to himself kind of weird. Whenever someone proposed that he was suffering from an inferiority complex, he'd be so shocked he'd snap at them with the bluster of the North Wind.

"I'm sure your brother is bad at something," a Chantry sister pointed out. "Let me think...."

"Don't." Carver twitched. "Leave my brother alone."

He'd respond similarly if the subject were Bethany, but no one tried to think ill of her, so they never heard Carver defend her. To them, he could only ever seem to talk about his older brother to whom he couldn't compare. Then Carver would return to swinging his sword, or kneeling before a carved figure of Andraste, and people would draw their own conclusions.

X

Of course, eight years meant eight birthdays. Then the dynamics changed, starting with the Hawke family.

“You can’t,” Garrett declared.

Carver wanted to join the king’s army. Training started as early as age fifteen, and Carver was on the cusp of it.

“You can’t go where I can’t follow,” Garrett persisted. “I’m your older brother. I have to watch over you.”

“I don’t need you to,” Carver returned. “When have you ever—“

“You’re always hiding somewhere, reading a book or swinging a sword! When would I have the opportunity—!”

“You’d have to go very far,” Bethany stepped in, eyes wide. “The king’s army trains near Denerim, and that touches the northern coast.”

*I’m scared of the dark*, Bethany used to whisper, when she and Carver used to share a room. *If I’m too scared, will I become a demon? Will you stop me?*

*You don’t have to be scared*, Carver had promised. *Not while I’m around.*

Carver nodded to Bethany. “You’ll have Garrett.”

This displeased their parents for some reason. “Carver, this isn’t the time for your unfounded sense of inferiority!” Their voices overlapped with Malcolm’s staccato and Leandra’s sordino:

“Your *siblings* are *mates*, and they *haven’t* completed their Harrowing yet. *Family* needs to *stick together*.”

“My baby boy in Denerim? Ohhh...!”

Carver held his mother’s hands and looked to his father. “I can’t swing a sword outside the Templar grounds or meditate in the Chantry anymore. I have to *do* something or I’ll go crazy.”

His family wouldn’t understand exactly what he was confessing.

No one in Thedas would.

Malcolm slumped, thinking about his stern words to his son years ago, and another Carver. He turned to his wife. “I’m sorry, Leandra, but I can’t accept the Templar order here just yet....”

She whipped her head. “So the alternative is to send our son to the north!? Look at him, Malcolm, he has Amell-blue eyes! Why do you

think we've run all this way to the back-end of Ferelden!?"

"I want to properly learn swordsmanship," Carver interrupted.

Leandra played with her hands within the cradle of Carver's palms. He couldn't feel guilty. "If this were Kirkwall, I could find someone easily...."

Malcolm's hand fell on his wife's. "That close to the royal palace, I'd be surprised if Carver wasn't safe."

Garrett and Bethany slowly caught up.

"Father!" Garrett gaped. "What happened to family!?"

Malcolm winced, his tone softening. "My boy, this is more— when you're older—" He scrubbed his face and sighed. "Carver wishes to be free."

Garrett exploded. "*And I can't!?*"

Leandra's eyes widened. "Are you discontent with something, Garrett?"

"No, but that's not the point!" Garrett spluttered. "Carver doesn't *have* to live far away, so why would he!?"

The Hawke mages *felt* strongly.

Carver stepped in before Garrett could catch his breath. "Thank you, father, mother."

Garrett turned on him, ambushed. "Brother, why would you— Do you not—love us?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning," Carver continued, "with the main trade caravan." Else he didn't think he'd be able to leave.

## Chapter End Notes

Good is not soft, and old baby boy is socially awkward :V

Please kudos and comment!

**!Spoiler Alert!**

Edit: I just learned that Leandra says Carver is 18, not 20 by the

time of DA2. Events in chapters 13-27 are occurring about a year ahead of canon, but some lines don't land when the subject is 17 years old. I've thus updated chapters 13-27 and replaced Carver's current age with 18. Let's pretend Carver has been 18 for more than a year now.... Woops.

Thank you for supporting this fic!

# Just A Soldier

## Chapter Notes

Friendly warning that I don't know anything military beyond what's in movies and video games :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Carver trained himself to the ground for the next two years. The commanding officers there quickly picked up the same observation as the Templars of Lothing - that Carver was More Hard-Working than Half the Bloody Recruits. He was also remarkably eloquent and learned.

“Carver Hawke, was it?” Loghain Mac Tir folded back a page of the bound stack in his hands. Everyone, including Loghain, was standing at parade rest.

Loghain had bags under his eyes after two years of a long and fruitless search for the beloved King Maric lost to sea. The royal court was already calling for Loghain to cease his efforts and conclude the king deceased - because everyone was physically tired, emotionally exhausted, had *long given up* - so the eye bags were looking to be permanent. But Loghain didn't want to give up. In fact in the two years Carver had trained in the king's army, Loghain had aged more in a month of debate with the court than in two years of simultaneously commanding an army and combing a sea for a body. Additionally, the Lieutenant-Commander - second only to the king, the Head-Commander - didn't have to regularly see the rank-and-file face-to-face, but he did so anyway. Loghain was a straightforward man who never forgot where he had come from.

Everyone in the king's army deeply respected him.

“You have any experience in requisitions?”

“Requisitions, Teyrn?” Carver understood numbers, but not how to quantify the force of an army, and the potatoes to fuel it.

“If not, you will now.” Loghain looked up and met his eyes. “Answer to Ser Cauthrien tomorrow on the sixth bell. You shall serve alongside her quartermaster.”

Carver eventually caught on to the intentions of his superiors. He was

better at numbers than most farm-raised recruits, he wrote with a clear voice, and most importantly, he was *driven* to succeed where he could. Cauthrien pushed him through different missions and widely-varied roles at a punishing pace. Carver could just be starting to adjust to his new responsibilities, then be handed another assignment before his head could stop spinning.

The soldiers around Carver received promotions as time passed, while Carver himself was only ever moved laterally. He was a convenient filler - and one that rarely complained. Carver realised too late that it was possible he was simple-minded.

He didn't mind.

He told himself he didn't, compared to what he expected ahead of him. He had come to deeply value the figures in his life that could no longer be reconciled with flat, fictional characters in a story. Carver just needed to be with the king's army when they marched to Ostagar.

Then Cauthrien summoned him to her office. The soldiers who had surpassed Carver were also present, and smirking at him.

"Teyrn Loghain regrets that he can't be here," Cauthrien shared. "The crowning of our new king demands the attendance of all council members and the royal court through the full ceremony. Teyrn Loghain has therefore assigned me the task of swearing you in to Maric's Shield in his stead."

"Congratulations, kid," one of the soldiers chuckled.

Carver stared, blindsided.

Cauthrien didn't delay. "Carver Hawke of Lothering, you are now promoted to Knight and submitted into Maric's Shield, the elite force of the king's army. From now on, you answer only to myself, Teyrn Loghain, or the king."

X

Walking out of that room was an out-of-body experience.

Carver's senior commented on it. "You must be tough as nails, kid."

Carver ignored him, but his senior slung an arm over his shoulder and trapped Carver in a conversation.

“Thought he looked familiar,” another soldier said.

A laugh. “We must have passed by him at least once on our way to Maric’s Shield. Kid’s been in all kinds of roles.”

“You’re young,” said the first, tightening his arm. “Got an explanation for that?”

Carver understood what they meant. Everyone in Maric’s Shield was weathered and grey. Before his promotion into the elite force, Carver had served as equals with - or superiors over - men and women who still remembered the last war, and no matter the world, no one liked seeing a young face in high ranks. The town kids of Lothing had treated Carver like a stray cat, but the soldiers of Denerim had treated him like less than dirt - just short of stepping out of line. Carver had been hazed since his first role change in the king’s army, and he didn’t expect his time to improve now that he was in Loghain’s personal unit.

Carver shrugged. “I go only where my merit takes me.” He couldn’t give any less a reason for others to find fault in him.

He received a slap on the back for his words. “Ha! Like I said, tough!”

The other members of Maric’s Shield crowded around without slowing their pace. In the upper floors of the army fortress, they didn’t have to worry about blocking the halls as they walked. The senior officers were more curious about Carver in the fashion of another world, where male soldiers would be curious about a female addition. Carver was an oddity, but in time acceptable.

“No one gets here easily,” someone to Carver’s right said. “Not even one of noble blood.”

“Princess here is noble-blooded,” teased the soldier with an arm around Carver.

Princess was bearded, tall, and built like a mountain. His bicep was the size of Carver’s head.

“You can relax here, you know,” Princess shared. “Everyone in Maric’s Shield knows you can’t get to where we are without working hard. Teyrn Loghain handpicks each one of us, and he’s as fair as you can find.”

“Hear, hear,” the others agreed.

Carver's brows furrowed, bewildered. "He handpicks us?"

"We don't hesitate in our duties, we can cooperate with others when necessary, and we're good at what we do," Princess ticked off. "Can't tell what Teyrn Loghain sees in you, with how busy he is, but I hear you were moved laterally for several months straight and no one heard a frustrated peep from you."

"Maybe the kid's a masochist," a soldier suggested, and everyone laughed.

Carver's tense shoulders eased. He wasn't being hazed, and that was good enough for him.

"Say, kid, what's your name?"

"Carver Hawke."

More laughter. "No, your *real* name."

Military life. No one went by their born name the instant they were called something else. At one point, people could only identify each other by their nicknames, because their real names were never used except on paper or by soldiers clearly under-ranked to them. It was a pain for Carver when he handled paperwork for the army. If "Mumble" wanted more paper and soap, then Carver would have to update their provider and have the supplies delivered to "Ser Carac's" barracks.

Not to speak of the military organisation of Ferelden's army. Anything structured in Ferelden was no older than the rebellion against Usurper King Meghren, and Ferelden's tradition of personal freedom engendered a laissez-faire attitude that hindered further development. Ranks were in Carver's opinion oversimplified, while positions like "quartermaster" were mere job descriptions independent of one's rank.

From the lowest rank to the highest, there were the Squires, Pages, Soldiers, Sergeants, Knights, Captains, then finally Commanders. Squires and Pages were sometimes the same person. Knights included both former squires who were finally knighted by their mentors, and commoners whom a superior officer recognised, so skill wasn't consistent within that rank. *Everyone* above the Pages was called Ser, except commoners who weren't knighted and Sergeants who led patrols below a size of sixty men. Outside the ranks, members of an army were *all* called soldiers.



Then there were the basic units of Ferelden might. A “legion” was a bann, arl, or teyrn’s personal forces. An “army” was the military power of a noble and every lesser noble in their domain. The “king’s army” was a legion specific to the crown, but in times of war, it could expand to reference the military might of every noble under the crown.

It made Carver want to tear out his hair.

Carver’s lips thinned. “I wasn’t called anything.”

“Maferath’s trousers you weren’t,” the others insisted.

Carver agreed. “Nothing I can repeat, anyway.”

There was a glum pause.

Then a slap to the back. “We’ll find you a new nickname, kid, one perfectly regrettable.”

“Or simple,” someone suggested. “How about ‘Hawke?’”

“No!” Carver immediately rejected. His voice flattened into a whine. “Why not just ‘kid?’”

“No!” Princess followed. “You have to suffer the same as the rest of us!”

X

Carver didn’t see a difference in his burden of duties before and after joining Maric’s Shield. He was still shuffled through various roles, except now it was just Cauthrien and Loghain assigning them, as opposed to Cauthrien’s small army of secretaries. One month, Carver could be hunting bandits down the western highway; the next, Carver could be sitting at a desk and slaving through papers.

He did, however, make a few acquaintances.

More accurately, Maric’s Shield was forcibly and often exposed to each other in their overlapping assignments, that they couldn’t help but learn more about each other than they wanted.

Nails had once dated Satin’s sister. Maker’s Breath could pass gas louder than a war horn. Speechless could talk about anything, any time, without ceasing.

Carver felt out of place with the generational gap between him and his “peers,” but the informal conduct that permeated the interactions of Maric’s Shield wore at his discomfort like sandpaper. They weren’t his friends, but granted, Carver wasn’t particularly close with anyone. If he were to put it kindly, Maric’s Shield was the closest of those he knew to the idea of “friends” - slightly above Lothering’s Chantry sisters, Templars, and Templar initiates. Carver might not grasp his peers’ jokes or relate with all their stories, but at the end of the day, everyone was odd. They resembled a collection of uncles, aunts, and nephews rather than a family, which was more than Carver had expected from his previous exposure to the king’s army.

Carver’s tireless days blended together, becoming months, becoming seasons. Then Satin teased him about a girl.

“I don’t have one,” Carver denied.

“Oh?” The others joined in, leaning over to Carver and Satin’s piles of papers. It was raining, and everyone’s desks were crowded together. Only bad weather could reliably see paperwork processed. “Then who’s Bethany?”

“*What.*”

A few of Maric’s Shield jumped. No one had heard Carver’s temper *crack* before.

Carver suddenly rose from his desk, and Satin surrendered a letter without prompting.

Carver accepted it stiffly. Scanned the letter with stormy eyes. Then pivoted out of the room without another word.

Those who had witnessed this hastily followed Carver at a distance, already amused. They watched him locate the sergeant who had recently returned from the southwest. The latter stood tall, wearing armour, weapons, and weathered skin all twice more seasoned than Carver’s - while Carver looked up at the sergeant with the gangly limbs and ill-fitting armour of a teenager a few steps short of adulthood.

“Who’re you?” the sergeant grunted.

Carver spoke coolly, not allowing his appearance to dominate the atmosphere. “Ser Carver, Knight of Maric’s Shield.”

The sergeant hastily straightened and crossed his chest in the Ferelden salute, flustered. “Ser!”

“What is this?” Carver held up Bethany’s letter between them.

The sergeant stared. “Ser?”

“This is mail,” Carver continued. “From *four years* ago.”

“Aye, ser, Lothering.” The sergeant lowered his arms. “Any farther south, and you hit the Wilds. Nothing important there.”

Carver stiffened. “Sergeant, remind me the purpose of patrolling.”

“To protect the highways, ser.”

“Why are the highways important?”

“Because of trade.”

“And?”

“...Mail?”

“Communication.” Carver’s ice-blue gaze hardened. “An army is only as good as its information. Answer to Ser Charis tomorrow and receive your new patrol routes from him. Dismissed.”

“S-Ser!” The sergeant morosely saluted.

Carver hunted down the rest of Ferelden’s backed-up mail. He found fifty letters from Bethany. She had spoken for the family to him in her writings, until Malcolm had apparently fallen ill and passed away the year Carver had left. Then Bethany’s letters had turned inward - soft little things that could have been Bethany merely writing to herself the way she used to murmur to Carver at night, like he was her reflection outside a mirror. Bethany had written about whatever had sprouted to mind:

Of Peaches’ fruitless pursuit of Garrett, and not of how Garrett was closing himself off under a veneer of wit.

Of Bethany’s passing jobs when she wanted to buy something for herself, because Leandra was occupied with grief.

Of how Bethany missed Carver.

He thought that his letters and the money he had been sending weren't being answered. Mediaeval mail was slow, but Carver knew when he was being rebuffed. Now, however, he realised that the state of Ferelden's mail south of Drakon River was still recovering from the Rebellion. After all, there was a difference between kicking out an Orlesian ruler, and driving out all Orlesian influence, and King Meghren hadn't ruled effectively to begin with. Ferelden was a patchwork the Orlesian king had abandoned halfway. Even the Orlesian Circle of Magi had been able to take and occupy Kinloch Hold without notice *eight years* after the Orlesians had been pushed out at the Battle of River Dane, until Loghain had learned of the tower and liberated it, and Maric had swept out the darkspawn drawn into the conflict.

Because recovering from an empire hadn't been enough - oh no, a wave of *darkspawn* had had to kick in as well.

*Maker's breath.*

It didn't help that the sergeant hadn't spoken falsely concerning Lothing's significance, or lack thereof. By a certain apostate's own description of the village, Lothing was the awkwardly isolated sort of settlement where for years, an apostate could draw Templars into the Wilds and kill them, and Lothing's Templars would still fail to successfully alert the Circle or call for backup.

"I hear you transferred Sergeant Kylar without Ser Charis's permission, Ser Carver."

Carver saluted Cauthrien where she ambushed him. "Sergeant Kylar underperformed in his duty for the past four years, without notice by Ser Charis. I gave them both the opportunity to move forward from their blunder."

Cauthrien crossed her arms.

Carver remained saluting.

"Teyrn Loghain will hear of this."

"When he does," Carver surrendered, "please forward this to him as well." He lowered his arms and extended a bound stack of papers to her with both hands.

Carver was made to wait in anticipation for three days.

Apparently drawing an audience with the king took time.

“This isn’t a real blight.” Loghain shook his head. “It’s too soon, and these reports are too infrequent. The scale of the darkspawn attacks is ultimately inconsequential.”

“Not for the peasantry,” Cailan pointed out. His circlet glinted across his forehead, thin and regal. “You agree that we should move to protect them - otherwise, you wouldn’t have brought this issue to me.”

“Yes, but we need not send the entirety of your army,” Loghain intoned. “Arl Eamon possesses the ideal means and men to address this issue. Let him sweep his backyard. This is an opportunity for us to reflect on the southernmost lands’ lack of bannorn, and grant the peasantry the right to elect a long-awaited landlord. Ferelden can afford more structure close to the Wilds.”

Cailan straightened. “And how would Arl Eamon know the appropriate procedure for erasing darkspawn influence on the surface? What orders could give him this knowledge?”

Loghain hesitated.

Cailan pressed. “What are we currently doing at the moment until I can locate such orders?”

“The only fault of the reports was in their delayed arrival.” This, Loghain could answer. “Your army is already improving communications.” His eyes flicked to Carver.

Cailan turned.

Carver straightened where he stood, the analysis he had written sitting open in Loghain’s hands. When Carver had combed through four years of mail from southern Ferelden and noted concerning reports in the most recent year, he hadn’t expected Cauthrien to actually share his paperwork with Loghain, who had then insisted that Carver accompany him to meet with the king.

Loghain recognised that between he who commanded the king’s forces, Cauthrien who served as his right hand, and Carver who changed desks every new moon, Carver himself had compiled the reports and analysed them for inconsistencies, and thus knew the contents more thoroughly than Cauthrien or Loghain could from

scanning his final report. Carver was to attend the meeting as the source of any detail his superiors wished to hear more about. Otherwise, he just had to stand still and look pretty.

Then Cailan peered at Carver. “I understand you compiled the reports yourself, ser knight.”

Carver nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“According to your grasp of reconnaissance, what is the recommended next step?”

Carver glanced at Loghain, who nodded. “I wasn’t present at the sightings, Your Majesty, but the reports don’t contradict each other. The darkspawn are behaving in invasive patterns. Protocol dictates we treat this as a hostile invasion.”

“Secure the highways, establish communication with the enemy, and evacuate the people?” Cailan recited. “What of protocol against mindless anarchists?”

“Cailan,” Loghain warned.

“We need experts!” Cailan insisted. “We need the input of the Grey Wardens and to crush this darkspawn invasion before it can gain momentum, just as my father did!”

“We don’t need to send your entire army!” Loghain repeated. “Let the Wardens dally south with Arl Eamon - *you* are not crossing the continent!”

Loghain had known Cailan since the latter had been in his nappies.

They both showed it.

“I will hear from Warden-Commander Duncan,” Cailan declared. “Then I will decide how to move my army.”

Duncan was summoned from the Grey Warden Compound in Denerim. He bowed to the king.

“This is a blight.”

Duncan looked like he hadn’t been sleeping well for a year, though he wore exhaustion better than Loghain, with tighter skin and a clearer gaze. He didn’t wait for Cailan to relieve him of his bow; Duncan straightened up on his own, then stood not at rest or attention, but as

equals with the king. As a Warden, he had no obligations to heads of state. His willingness to answer when called, however - and without a fuss - reflected well on him as a man of reason.

Carver doubted that anyone in the room noticed it.

Loghain dropped Carver's report on the nearest table. "A *blight!*" he repeated.

"How do you know?" Cailan's voice lifted.

Duncan was cool as milk. "The Wardens have their ways. My vows stay my tongue, but I can assure Your Majesty that the darkspawn threat is real."

Loghain spluttered. "Scattered sightings of darkspawn do not constitute a surface *war*."

"Uncle," Cailan curbed. "The Wardens grasp the danger of darkspawn better than anyone. If Warden-Commander Duncan identifies this invasion as a blight, then we are compelled to treat it as such."

"And how would the Warden know?" Loghain's eyes narrowed at Duncan. "He hasn't glanced once at the reports since stepping in here. Do the Grey Wardens run their own information networks in their host nations, independent of local governance? Do the Wardens maintain cross-border correspondence during times of peace as well as blights?"

Duncan acknowledged Loghain. "I grew suspicious of a darkspawn threat two months ago, and forwarded my concerns to Montsimmard. They have since confirmed the presence of an archdemon in Ferelden."

"Montsimmard," Loghain repeated.

"It is the location of the Grey Warden headquarters in Orlais."

"It is also the location of Orlais' Circle of Magi." The same organisation that had occupied Kinloch Hold, until Loghain had to personally drive them out. It was also no secret that Duncan had served the Orlesian order of Grey Wardens until King Maric had overturned King Arland's banishment of the Wardens from Ferelden. Loghain frowned. "What of the archdemon?"

Duncan opened his mouth.

“Not you.” Loghain turned.

Carver blinked. Everyone’s eyes were on him.

He cleared his throat. “The reports are insubstantial,” he trod carefully. “However, highway patrolmen rarely deviate far from their path. We have learned just this month of a Dalish clan in the Brecilian outskirts that has possibly been camping there for at least a year.”

Cailan nodded. “Without orders to investigate the less populated areas south of Drakon River, our soldiers cannot learn more of what possibly lies in Ferelden. The archdemon could be lurking in the Korcari Wilds!”

“Along with witches,” Loghain muttered. “Until our scouts gain a firmer grasp of the situation in the south, we cannot send an army marching across the continent without expecting repercussions. Need I remind you, Your Majesty, the kingdom’s capital sits by the sea.”

“We have amicable relations with the Free Marches,” Cailan dismissed. “We haven’t been at war with a foreign power since you and my father drove the Orlesians out. This is the perfect opportunity for my army and I to address an event that the world hasn’t witnessed since the age of griffons! I’ve decided - the king and his army shall march south to Ostarag and eradicate this evil from Ferelden!”

“The *king*,” Loghain curtly added, “will also be accompanied by his banners. Starting with Teyrn Bryce Cousland. If you want this to be a war, then treat it as such.”

“Uncle!”

“This is court,” Loghain returned. “One must observe etiquette. Your advice has been heard, Warden-Commander.”

Duncan bowed.

“He’s coming as well!” Cailan pointed. “The Warden-Commander from now on has my ear equal to a council member. Everyone is dismissed!”

They were kicked out of the throne room.

Loghain didn’t speak to Carver until they were back in the army barracks.



“Has the king any more *mail* from the past four years?” Loghain turned.

Carver’s lips thinned. This wasn’t his day. “I’ve repaired the flow of mail to the capital, Teyrn. The darkspawn reports were the only articles that I judged required immediate attention.”

“Answer the question, knight.”

Carver inwardly sighed. He extended a letter sealed with the Redcliffe heraldry. “This was sent to the king through the common mail. Apparently, Arl Eamon hadn’t found it important enough to send with a runner like the rest of his missives to the capital. It equates to a passing thought.”

“I’ll reserve my opinions till after reading it.” Loghain took the letter. The wax was unbroken, if a tad pudgier than expected from an arl’s careful hand. “Hmm.” Loghain glanced up at Carver.

Carver’s face was stone.

Loghain broke the seal and scanned the letter. Carver knew the gist of what it said.

Queen Anora hadn’t borne a child in the decade since she and Cailan had wedded. Cailan was still young enough to consider a more fitting wife.

“That’s a letter for the king, Teyrn,” Carver said quietly.

Loghain folded the letter. “So it is,” he firmly agreed.

Queen Anora’s possibly barren womb was already a long-standing rumour, but it was different seeing the unconfidence reflected in the hand of an arl, even if Arl Eamon was Cailan’s uncle by blood. The second blow came with the fact that Eamon’s Orlesian wife had delivered him a child *after* a decade of marriage.

Loghain would have to reseal the letter by melting the wax a little. “You didn’t read this, knight.”

“I understand.”

X

Their discretion was moot.

Somehow, with word of a blight rode rumours of Cailan and Empress Celene. The king obviously acknowledged a southern darkspawn threat great enough to summon the military power of not just a few Ferelden nobles, but of the kingdom's three big names - Theirin, Cousland, and Guerrin. The "king's army" had now grown from a legion to an official army. However, Ferelden's Grey Wardens - the keys to success - were far from numerous enough to address a so-called blight, while the bulk of the Wardens' continental forces sat west in Orlais.

Cailan made no secret of his sudden correspondence with Empress Celene. It would be most convenient for Cailan if he didn't have to share a glorious victory with chevaliers and if Orlais merely used their forces to clear a path out of Montsimmard for their Wardens. Thus, Cailan requested that the empress do her part in addressing the blight, and no more.

Others overanalyzed his message. If Cailan was willing to reach out to an Orlesian ruler for help with the blight, it was a wonder he hadn't wielded the first tool in politics.

### Marriage.

Since Celene's premature crowning as empress at the tender age of sixteen, Celene had survived by baiting favourable alliances with her unclaimed hand. The big names of Orlais were proof of her ability to transform stiff families into steadfast allies despite not yet having married into them - even now into her twenty-sixth year. It was to the common people's understanding that if Cailan wanted cooperation from Celene, he would have to at least consider setting aside his barren queen and reaching out to the unmarried empress.

Fortunately, the common folk were not given reason to believe that their opinions were reflected in Ferelden's nobility, who had the power to breathe life into suspicions. Especially as it didn't help that Celene's offer of sending legions of chevaliers to Ferelden anyway could be taken as proof that she had found something pleasing of Cailan, like a marriage prospect.

Half of the nobility secretly and warily watched Celene's responses. Orlais had used the cover of blights to conquer other nations before, from the Anderfels to the Free Marches and Nevarra inbetween, and time had not erased either side's impressions of each other. Vocal Orlesian nobles like Celene's cousin Gaspard de Chalons still viewed Ferelden as a territory that had been misled into believing itself

independent, while any Ferelden noble would readily repel annexation. When Cailan and his still-gathering army easily won their first clash with darkspawn in Ostagar, the southern threat shrank from Ferelden nobles' minds in the shadow of a possible western threat.

In the background of wild rumours and the sudden mobilisation of Ferelden forces, Carver rode ahead of Duncan to the Coastlands. There had been initial resistance from Loghain, when he had learned of Carver's plans while the king's army was still preparing to leave for Ostagar.

"Someone needs to sit in the capital while the king and his army are gone," Loghain had said, "and you have studied under Ser Cauthrien long enough."

Carver was better served in logistics than leadership, however - or so he had claimed. Arl Howe's neglect of the roads over the winter had made muddy slopes of Amaranthine's route for Ostagar, and Carver couldn't trust Ser Charis and Sergeant Kylar with the vital necks of the western highway. Carver would oversee them himself - for a little while, then return to the capital.

And then march south to be with the king's army, as was his duty.

Loghain hadn't been impressed with the last addition, but Cauthrien had pointed out that she was still leaving her army of secretaries behind in Denerim. The capital could afford to stand for a month or two without a member of Maric's Shield present.

So while the king's army moved and fought in the south, Carver rode to Amaranthine first, to check on the Howe legion's progress, then to Highever, to check on the Cousland legion's. Ostensibly.

Castle Cousland was breezy, dry, and almost too trusting.

"Val Royeaux?" Oriana echoed.

"Can it be done?" Carver asked tensely.

The wife of Bryce Cousland's heir flipped the sealed letter in her grip. Her hands were paled by a recent life indoors, but Oriana's Antivan blood still faintly bronzed her skin.

The lady pursed her lips, eyes sharp. "My family are mere merchants. We don't involve ourselves in the post business."

“You won’t read this when I leave the room,” Carver stated. “Even so, the kingdom will be grateful for your family’s efforts. Off the record.”

“I’ll think about it and find you later.”

“Soon,” Carver pressed. The empress of Orlais needed to understand that spreading rumours of hers and Cailan’s marriage would be as detrimental for the empress as it would be for Ferelden.

After all, Cailan was an uncomplicated man. He would not grasp the transient nature of rumours like Celene and her handmaiden Briala would, and Cailan was too honourable to allow himself or Celene to disrespect a deal - even one made unknowingly. Celene was fortunate to have complicated people like Queen Anora and Teyrn Loghain standing between the king and gossip.

The letter was a soup of lies, but Celene was Orlesian.

Oriana later found Carver, her face pale but set firm. “I’ll have my father and his contacts deliver this safely,” she swore, “if you promise me one thing.”

Carver debated the costs. A possible civil war, for a debt to a minor lady. He reluctantly nodded.

“See my husband returns home safely.”

Carver winced.

“Promise,” Oriana sternly pressed.

Oriana had already skimmed the letter, and couldn’t know how much of it was not to be taken seriously, how much of it was a bluff, and how much of it was blackmail. Antivan merchants understood the power of misinformation and thus never shared the contents of their packages - not before contracting a price from their employers, or receiving a better offer. Oriana’s protectiveness of her husband was a perfectly reliable price only matched by her vengeful wrath should her husband fall.

Carver inwardly sighed. It was Oriana, or an Antivan who hadn’t married into the loyal, patriotic Couslands. Any other communication line to Orlais would be detected by wary and staunch Ferelden nobles like Loghain, whose suspicion of western influences had recently heightened. “It will be done.”

Carver had to reshuffle his alphabet and reach for a different plan, which led him to hastily locating Bryce Cousland in the main hall of his castle.

“I wasn’t expecting a soldier from the capital.” Bryce’s brows rose, but he welcomed Carver with a smile. “Is there an update from the king’s army, ser...?”

“Just a soldier,” Carver dismissed.

He had to balance just the right amount of apathy, inflation, and brevity to persuade his target into a thought without actually thinking. Carver was already young-looking, and not easily mistaken for a member of Maric’s Shield. Now, he had to also aim for “harmless.”

“Apologies for my sudden appearance, Teyrn Bryce,” Carver spoke, “but the king expects timely attendance in times of war, and there is only so much a runner can do delivering messages. I passed the Howe legion leaving for the south while I was riding through the Coastlands, however I could not get into contact with Arl Rendon directly. It would not do for the Howe legion to arrive at Ostagar without their commanding officer, and it is commonly understood that you and the arl share a close friendship. Have you an explanation for Arl Rendon’s unknown location that I can deliver to the king?”

Carver *had* passed the Howe legion leaving for the south - by persuasion of the royal crest of the king’s army. No detours allowed.

Bryce blinked. “Arl Rendon sent word to me that he and his soldiers would march to Castle Cousland before following my son south through our own, unmuddied roads. I didn’t receive an update that they would brave the western highway after all.”

“The king’s army has a skeleton crew assisting travel through the highways,” Carver shared. “Amaranthine’s roads have long been confirmed acceptable for use.”

“...It appears Arl Rendon and I have been misled.” Bryce paused, then remembered himself and smiled. “I apologise that I can’t enlighten the king on Arl Rendon’s location.”

“The king will understand.” Carver saluted and walked away.

Now he had to stay - and avoid the Grey Warden about to visit - until Fergus Cousland’s departure. He couldn’t have Duncan correct the

assumption that the nameless knight in Bryce's castle was anything less than a knight of Maric's Shield.

Carver preferred misunderstandings by his own design.

## Chapter End Notes

A/N: The Dragon Age wiki can't give me a reason why some Sers and nobles are addressed by their first name while others are by their last. It doesn't seem to be determined by noble history, noble/military rank, or career experience. Thus for consistency, I've decided to use everyone's first name, because I can accept replacing "Arl Howe" with "Arl Rendon" more than I can accept replacing "Teyrn Loghain" with "Teyrn Mac Tir." It just doesn't feel right.

A/N II: Loghain is my favourite Dragon Age villain, so I hope to do him justice. That said, when I started researching Loghain's timeline of villainy, I had to grab Eamon by the shoulders and shake him - because Alistair is age 25 and Connor is around age 10 in DAO. Which means Isolde hadn't been able to deliver a child to Eamon until after a decade of being married. Then Eamon had the gall to write to Cailan that he should consider divorcing Anora because she hadn't been able to produce a child within a decade of marriage.

Really, Eamon? I get that Cailan needs an heir, but in DAO, he's only 25 - plenty younger than Eamon, who's at least old enough to be Cailan's father, and had only been able to father a son in the last decade.

Anora's a b\*tch, but she has my respect for putting up with this crap like a b\*tch. You go girl.

Meanwhile in the background, Loghain had Eamon poisoned - supposedly to delay Eamon from coming to Ostagar and welcoming the Orlesian Wardens and chevaliers into Ferelden. It's not like Loghain isn't also a father. The Mac Tir's are stone-cold mf's and they have my *respect*.

# No One

“Don’t you have more messages to run?”

Carver placidly marched with the Cousland legion. “Not unless Lady Oriana grants me leave to Lake Calenhad or Orzammar.”

Fergus Cousland blinked. “My wife...?”

Carver suddenly drew his sword and cut down an arrow before Fergus’s chest.

“*Archers!*” the Cousland legion shouted.

Everyone hastily formed up to shield each other and address the company of Howe soldiers that had ambushed them. Fergus raised his shield and barreled through the Howes’ vanguard, before drawing his sword and cutting two limbs off a man in one stroke. The Cousland heir roared - shocked and betrayed - and the Howe legion flinched.

“*Halt!*”

A few Howe soldiers froze, unsure how to proceed without a Howe to direct them, but the majority of the troops pushed forward in their task to slaughter the legion of Highever. Fergus and his soldiers, however, had received enough warning of the ambush, and the Howe legion’s plan was crumbling at first contact.

Fergus bashed another soldier to the ground, then stomped on the enemy’s head once. Their head exploded like a dropped egg.

“Traitors - I said halt, or *die!*”

The remaining Howe soldiers dropped their weapons and held their hands up.

Fergus caught his breath, swivelling his head. “Where is your commander?” Panic rose in his voice. “Where is Arl Rendon!?”

“C-Castle Cousland by now,” a Howe soldier bravely answered.

Fergus grabbed them. “And my family!? My son!?”

“Arl Rendon ordered the deaths of all Couslands, milord....”

Fergus pivoted.

Carver wiped his sword on a Howe soldier. No one had left the ambush unchallenged. "Lord Fergus."

The lord rounded on him. "Arrest me later, knight!"

"Return home," Carver evenly continued, but inwardly shivered. Had Rendon Howe not been an ambitious snake, Carver would have been forced to try arresting the enraged Fergus and entire Cousland legion for desertion - on his own. "Arl Rendon broke the law first by turning his legion on his fellow countrymen. If he has grown bold enough to target a big name, I have reason to fear he has also set his sights on his next most powerful neighbour: the Kendells of Denerim. Secure your ancestral home first - then divide your legion with the Kendells legion and the king's army left in the capital."

"Are you done?" Fergus pressed.

"You have time to listen," Carver curtly replied. "Arl Rendon's main legion is already headed south for Ostagar, led by his son Lord Thomas." With persuasion. "It appears Arl Rendon has sent a leaderless portion of the rest of his soldiers to ambush you, leaving Arl Rendon with only a squad to cooperate with him in a castle siege. If your father wasn't expecting Arl Rendon and his soldiers, Teyrn Bryce could have kept the gates closed against them until their intentions were revealed. I believe that Lady Oriana and your son reside in the living quarters of Castle Cousland, placing them far from the gates."

"My mother and sister are shieldmaidens," Fergus slowed. "They could have armed themselves, located Oriana and Oren...."

"Go see Castle Cousland secured." Carver breathed. "Recall your people and their families back home to Highever until the full extent of Arl Rendon's plan can be perceived. I must ride to Denerim."

"Take one of our horses." Fergus composed himself and removed a chain from his neck. "And my crest - my people will know you speak for me when you send them to Highever. The Howes will pay."

Carver accepted the horse of one of the legion's fallen and conspicuously rode away, then veered off the path for the Chasind who had secretly witnessed the ambush. In another timeline, the Chasind would have carried Fergus - the only survivor of the slaughter disguised as a bandit attack - away from the wreckage and nursed him through his wounds and a terrible fever, before Fergus would ride to



Denerim to learn that the blight had come and gone. Now the Chasind, the original locals of Ferelden, warily eyed Carver with his Marcher-blue gaze as he descended from his horse, approached them - and with a straight face, asked them about a honey-scented flower that had a red bud.

The two parties exchanged tense and bewildered words. Eventually, the Chasind realised that Carver was just Too Stupid to be a Threat.

“Ah, the Mabari Madness.” A Chasind nodded. “It’s an ol’ mabari disease that don’ matter to men.”

“It matters to me,” Carver insisted.

A scoff. “You don’ understand, lowlander - the Madness is a sickness for mabari, but a death sentence for humans. Besides, it’s been gone for hun’reds of years.”

“Luckily, I don’t intend the cure for a human.” Carver turned cross. It was a long day. “Just share the recipe with me, *please*. I’ll hunt down the ingredients myself, starting with the flower.”

The Chasind eventually shared the cure’s recipe in exchange for the most valuable possession on Carver, with his castle-forged armour, sword, and crests of influential meaning: his horse.

Carver grumbled and traded it over. He’d walk to the nearest town and rent a horse from there, then relay until he was back in Denerim before certain noblemen could violate the capital.

He passed by more wild rumours as he did, and tried not to let them stick in his mind like filth picked up by a ball of fur.

Word was that Teyrn Bryce had allowed Arl Rendon into his home to clarify a misunderstanding. The next morning, Castle Cousland had caught on fire, Bryce and his wife Eleanor had been found slain in the castle’s pantry, and the next generations of the Cousland line had gone missing.

Word was also that Fergus had set fire to the castle himself and killed his own parents to make teyrnirs of his new family, while the youngest of Bryce’s children had run away to be with an older man.

Either way, Highever was in disarray, and there was no word on Rendon Howe’s location.

Carver rode hard.

X

“You want me to *what*?”

“Arrest Arl Rendon for desertion when sighted,” Carver repeated. “I have more highways to supervise.”

“All the way to Ostagar?” Ser Rhiannon, the oldest knight left in Denerim, cocked a brow, then scrubbed her weathered face. “It should be *you* in this chair, not me. I can handle logistics, Ser Carver. I cannot presume to grasp how Teyrn Loghain wants the capital to be run while Ferelden’s most important figures are all down south.”

“Delegate.”

“Just not to Lord Vaughan?” Rhiannon intoned. “While Arl Urien marches with the king, his son is Lord of Denerim. Help me understand why you’re opposed to the residual king’s army cooperating with the residual Kendells legion to keep the peace in the capital.”

“I have no issue with the Kendells legion, just Lord Vaughan.”

“Does he deliver mail late?” Rhiannon deadpanned. “The others are starting to call you Postboy.”

“Better than what they used to call me.”

Rhiannon’s lips thinned regretfully.

Carver shrugged. “Delegate, Ser Rhiannon. Others listen to you. I have to assess the southern highways.”

“You couldn’t be convinced to leave Denerim, before. Now you can’t be convinced to stay? Will you at least give me a believable reason why Arl Rendon would disobey the king’s call to Ostagar?”

“For whatever reason could compel Arl Rendon to wipe out half of the Couslands.”

Rhiannon paled. “Then...the rumours....”

“Lord Fergus assigned me his crest to send loyal servants of his family back to Highever. For their safety.”

Rhiannon's face reddened. "Arl Rendon would dare turn his gaze here!?"

"Don't allow suspicions to carry you away, Ser Rhiannon. Do your duty, and I will see to the rest."

"I...of course, Ser Carver." She sighed. "We're the same rank, but I guess this is the difference between the common soldier and a member of Maric's Shield. I'll have some of our soldiers protect the servants and families returning to Highever. Leave the king's army here to me - the path to Ostagar is waiting."

Carver shed a little sympathy for Rhiannon. He wasn't going to leave Denerim without stirring a last bit of ruckus first.

When he found Denerim's alienage, he flashed Fergus's crest to the first elf in sight and demanded all Highever servants and their families leave for home by the end of the day. His abrupt command was welcomed *so excitedly*, the local hahren had to intervene.

"We cannot suspend two weddings at the drop of a hat!" Valendrian halted.

"Are the couples engaged?" Carver manoeuvred. "They'd already be family to the Couslands' servants. Their weddings can be moved to Highever."

"What of my cousin, who *isn't* engaged to a Highever servant?" an elf in Carver's face hotly demanded. "I can't get married in Highever while my cousin weds alone in Denerim. What is a wedding without the presence of friends and family?"

"You are engaged to a Highever citizen?" Carver addressed. "You are family to the citizen, and your cousin is your family. All of you may travel for Highever together."

The elf blinked as she followed Carver's logic, before hesitantly clapping hands with two more elves, forming a trio of red-heads. "Shianni, Soris...?"

The shortest woman shrugged. "I haven't seen the outside of Denerim in years."

The only male smiled. "So long as Valora doesn't mind. I want her to enjoy her wedding."

The first elf sighed. "All this because I'm engaged to the Highever-born Nelaros...."

The elves that were crowded around Carver suddenly burst with vocal excitement. "He's a dream come true!" "You can't *not* marry him!" "Go, Kallian - or *I* will!" Laughter peppered the alienage.

Carver exhaled. So long as the alienage didn't turn into a mob.

Valendrian touched the shoulders of the elves Kallian, Shianni, and Soris. "Collect your things and travel with young Nelaros to Highever, da'len - and tell Cyrion and young Valora's family the same. Dareth shiral."

"Ma serannas," the trio thanked in unison.

"One more thing," Carver delayed. The elves' faces turned suspicious and unpleasant, before Carver handed Fergus's chain to them. They blinked. "Tell others what I told you, and return this crest to Lord Fergus at Castle Cousland when you arrive. If you face resistance on your journey, summon a member of the king's army and mention Ser Rhiannon."

X

Carver sold all the possessions he didn't need for his trip, then purchased updated maps of the Brecilian Forest before rushing south for Clan Sabrae's camp. He encountered a remote village stirred up by the presence of Dalish elves in their forest, and he stepped in to scare them with darkspawn more than nomads, and persuade them to call for the king's army patrolling the highways for protection. If the war front in Ostagar didn't pan out well, Ferelden could benefit from established communication and organisation in the remote village. Carver also extracted the location of elven ruins from the villagers before rushing in the direction of the site.

The Sabrae clan abruptly drew their weapons at Carver as he barged into their camp, red-faced and panting. He hadn't had to hike through forests in a lifetime - so to speak. At least, not while wearing and carrying all he owned.

"Is this - huff - a Dalish clan?"

"Leave, shem. We have no patience for trespassers - especially today."

Beyond the line of elven camp guards, Carver could see an elf

moaning in his cot while a grey-haired elven woman ran glowing hands over his forehead.

“Has your patient been feverish?” Carver bulldozed. “Delirious? Did he recently enter a dense, humid structure taken over by nature, old enough to attract transformative diseases?” Now he was just improvising.

“Did you not hear us the first time, shemlen? Leave!”

“Hold.”

The guards turned while the other camp-dwellers watched the exchange with their hands near hunting and crafts gear, just in case. The elderly woman tending to the bedridden elf beckoned Carver approach. He did, and twenty nocked arrows followed him.

“You know of this sickness?” the woman asked.

Carver kneeled by the unconscious patient’s side and nodded solemnly. “Yes - keeper? It is the blight. I have a tonic that will alleviate the symptoms, but the young elf in your care would do better with the Grey Wardens gathered in Ostagar.”

“I appreciate your brevity, human. How do I know you speak true?”

Carver showed the Mabari Madness cure he had concocted ahead of time. “Your ward is already dying. If this tonic doesn’t improve his state by the end of the day, you may take my life as compensation.”

She peered at him for a long breath. Eventually, she spoke. “You risk much for a stranger, and an elf. Who sent you?”

“This is no ploy,” Carver denied. “If you need an angle, then trust in the Wardens’ perpetual shortage of recruits.”

“You serve the Wardens?”

“We are...co-workers.” The keeper didn’t appear familiar with the term. “We happen to share the same purpose and place of work. If they lose, we all lose.” Carver watched the sick elf struggle to breathe. “How long ago did he contract the taint?”

The keeper jerked her chin once, and the guards lowered their bows in unison. She explained the situation to Carver as he slowly fed the tonic to the patient, and she used magic to persuade the young elf’s

body to recover with the mixture's assistance.

Apparently, a pair of Dalish youngsters had gone missing two days ago, and after nonstop searching, the clan had been able to find only one of their missing lying feverish and unconscious in an elven ruin, surrounded by corpses decayed to the bone and a four-legged mass of flesh and fur that could have been a bear once. The ill elf's life was now hanging by a thread composed of the keeper Marethari's magical prowess and the elf's own insurmountable willpower. It was a miracle the elf hadn't died before Carver arrived. With half of the clan still searching for the other missing elf, it was no wonder the traditionally neutral Dalish had greeted Carver's sudden appearance with frazzled nerves and quick hostility.

Carver grilled Keeper Marethari. How had the mutated bear smelled? Did anyone touch it? Were there surfaces that shared the same intrinsic strangeness as the bear? Marethari answered patiently, with quick responses from her clanmates around her when she needed clarification. She expected Carver to receive more accurate descriptions of the elven site when the search party would return that night.

"Keep them separate from the rest of your clan," Carver advised. "The bear and the strange mirror you describe potentially have the blight, and prolonged occupation of the same room as them may have endangered the search party. The greatest concern is darkspawn, as once-animated corpses aren't an issue. With the bear dead, darkspawn won't be attracted to its location, but I'm concerned about this mirror."

"No artefact of our past is worth the safety of our present," Marethari decided. "We are willing to shatter that mirror to pieces if it means protecting the rest of us. What advice have you, however, if Clan Sabrae turns out to have contracted the blight? Most of us have searched the ruin at least once."

"You say the bear had no memorable scent," Carver recalled. Smell was caused by particles of an object making contact with one's sensors. A scentless darkspawn meant the amount of the blood it was emitting was insignificant, and most Thedosians were immune to anything short of actually ingesting or bathing in darkspawn blood. Otherwise, battling darkspawn would have resulted in more darkspawn with every blight. "These precautions might mean nothing. However, if we all contract the taint, I have enough tonic for three people, and a recipe to make more. That would buy your clan enough

time to travel to Ostagar and request permission to join the Grey Wardens.”

A sigh of relief rippled through the clan.

Marethari minutely bowed her head in gratitude. “If none of us have a fever by the end of today, we will know the Creators have smiled on us.”

It was a tense twelve hours marked with the return and quarantine of the search party, before the young, tainted elf’s eyes finally fluttered open.

“Keeper Marethari...?”

The elven woman tiredly smiled. “It appears we may all keep our lives, tonight.”

X

Carver later woke to the sun already breaking through the trees and Clan Sabrae packing up to find a new home. The elves who had been warily watching him were gone. Carver wandered through the camp until he found the keeper quietly conversing with the elf who had been bedridden last Carver remembered. Marethari looked up when Carver approached.

“Theron came through while you were asleep,” Marethari greeted.

Carver sighed. “I wish you had woken me.” He would have wanted to check the patient’s condition. Regardless, Carver nodded once. “It’s good to see you up. You might have the strongest spirit in all of Thedas.”

Wine-red eyes blinked slowly. “You are the human who saved my life.” The young elf inclined his head. “Ma serannas.”

Carver nodded, then turned. “Keeper, I admit I wasn’t supposed to dally in the forest this long. I’ll share with you the tonic’s recipe, but I must leave posthaste.”

“A moment,” Marethari stilled. “Knowledge is power, and I have questions. How did you know your tonic would work? I am a keeper of history, and I would have expected this tonic to be widespread if its effects were known.”

Carver sighed. "It's originally intended for mabari, but compared to them, elves have a longer and richer history of magic running in their veins. While the tonic does nothing to humans, I figured it could help the People."

"You brought us a tonic that was useless to you? ...You were prepared to die the instant you stepped into our camp. I would have your name."

"I'm no one."

"Now don't give me that, da'len." Marethari didn't place her hands on her hips, but she did lift her chin, and Carver straightened. "You wandered into our camp and didn't help Theron to lower our arrows, but to address someone in pain. The Dalish have a long memory, and Clan Sabrae would have a friend's name."

"Keeper—"

"I'd have it now, if you're in such a hurry."

Carver wasn't used to direct attention, especially outside military context. Most everyone he encountered ignored him. "...Carver," he mumbled. "Really, I'm no one."

"Not to us, you aren't." Marethari touched the elbow of the young elf and nodded to Carver. "A few of our hunters carefully destroyed the mirror and returned to us. I now declare that Theron Mahariel will be the clan's halla breeder no longer, and shall travel with you, Carver, to Ostagar. With the Creators' mercy, the Wardens will take Theron in."

Theron moved to Carver's side, but Carver stopped him. "I believe your clan has a certain farewell planned for you. I will wait at the edge of camp."

Theron looked to Marethari, who paused in surprise at Carver's decision, then nodded. "If Carver is willing to wait, then...yes, we would send you away properly, da'len."

Clan Sabrae was small and attached to each other.

Carver stood at the edge of camp and watched the news spread through the clan with every elf assembling in two rows. Marethari eventually walked down the aisle of sorrowful faces and turned to face the other end, from where Theron tentatively stepped through to meet gazes with his clan-mates once more. Carver wasn't entirely familiar



with Dalish traditions, but the farewell seemed a subdued affair, similar to a lost soul's boat drifting down the quiet corridor of Styx's shores. No words were exchanged, but the elves each nodded to Theron meaningfully, and when the young elf reached Marethari, he was close to tears.

It was rough to watch.

Carver's eyes flicked to the keeper's First, who had been in the search party and was now biting her lip with sudden emotion. The clan had apparently reached a consensus regarding their missing member's fate, and declared the young Tamlen dead on the same day Theron's departure was announced. Not everyone had agreed with the decision, but they didn't have the resources to keep searching for Tamlen, and it was prudently determined that it was time for a new forest space to call home. Carver had admittedly been keeping his distance from the First, Merrill, to prevent himself from speaking with someone he had already decided should be "Garrett's friend," and to avoid the likely danger of accidentally making the elf mage cry during the clan's bluest hour. Merrill possessed a sweet face, and to paint it with tears would fill Carver with guilt appropriate for having kicked a puppy.

It was too late for Carver to realise that he was socially awkward.

He wordlessly turned when Theron reached him, unable to find a gesture that would lessen the pain of leaving one's family and possibly dying in at least a year's time. Thus Carver and Theron vanished silently, solemnly, into the forest together like raindrops tossed into the ocean.

They eventually rented two horses from the remote village, then crossed Drakon River to ride the West Road for the Imperial Highway, a remnant of the Tevinter Empire and the only road to Ostagar. The villagers suspiciously eyed Theron, three of their own recognising the young elf as one of the Dalish who had pointed an arrow at them and demanded their leave. Theron didn't shy from the attention and held his head up high, silent but not apologising for his character. Carver respected Theron's strength to do so when he was quietly weeping just moments ago. The halla breeder accepted his horse calmly and mounted it as if it wasn't his first time. He didn't speak until the two of them were well down the West Road.

"...Carver?" Theron's voice was rough from crying and prolonged silence. "Why do we move west, instead of south through the Brecilian Passage? I understand bandits plague human roads, while the only

dangers of the Passage are bears and wolves. The humans that trek the Passage also do so in tight groups and on a schedule, allowing for clean avoidance of them.”

Carver knew what Theron spoke of. The Brecilian Passage connected Denerim with Gwaren, Loghain’s domain, which was why the teyrn was able to rule Gwaren from the capital. Ever since Maric’s disappearance, however, Loghain had grown more occupied with northern affairs than ruling a territory that was already running well with minimal interference, and the traffic through the Passage correspondingly lessened. Still, Carver had to inwardly deadpan at Theron’s description. Bears and wolves were enough deterrent for normal people to travel the Passage, much less bandits. The Dalish must have had a higher floor for what constituted a threat.

“I can’t make you fight the way to Ostagar,” Carver shared. Carver might have been swinging a sword since he was a child, but he couldn’t compare himself to the grey-haired veterans of the king’s army, the forest-frolicking Dalish, the Gwaren militia, or a seasoned Grey Warden. If they rode the Brecilian Passage, Carver knew who would end up fending off wildlife for the both of them. “You might feel fine now, but this is also your first time riding a horse’s saddle. You’ll feel sore starting tomorrow, and evasive of battle - not to speak of the taint still slowly running through you. Even if we rode down the Passage, we’d still have to eventually head west through the Southron Hills for Ostagar. If we take human highways, at least the king’s army will smoothen out our journey.”

“Your king’s army would help us that much?”

“Every able-bodied soldier is riding for Ostagar.” Carver’s lips quirked shallowly. “We aren’t the only ones seeking out the blight.” And the Imperial Highway leading to Ostagar began at one place.

Lothering.

# Postboy

## Chapter Notes

In reference to Someone Else, should I use “themselves” or “themselves” as a pronoun? Let me know what you guys think.

Also to TheReader994: Thanks, and no problem! I have Alistair at age 25 by the Fifth Blight, according to the DA wiki. This allowed me to conclude on Arl Eamon’s “pot and kettle” situation as you eloquently put it.

One thing about writing, you end up searching topics that make you sound like a psychopathic divorcee with a murderous streak and a weakness for fine cheeses. You also do a lot of math for fictional birthdays and historical events.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Carver and Theron began to draw eyes as the West Road’s traffic thickened, and when they neared Lothering, Carver donned his helmet, not eager to be recognised by anyone from his hometown. Fortunately, while he and Theron were an odd sight together, no one bothered them. Carver levelled his chin with the ground, and Theron was unfazed by attention, allowing the armoured knight and Dalish elf to turn adequately forgettable with an air of belonging.

They handed their horses off to a stablehand, before they headed towards the heart of Lothering where a river divided the wooden, old-fashioned half of town from the stone structures of the more modern side. Farmers populated the former while artisans dominated the latter, and all were united in their sense of harmless, unchecked freedom; thus Lothering was in truth too loose a place to have a “centre,” save for where the local tavern and Chantry faced each other across the river. Carver was reluctant to cross the bridge for the tavern - where he would be more likely recognised - but he and Theron needed to eat, and Carver needed directions to the local sergeant.

Turned out, the sergeant needed him more.

“Postb— Ser Carver?” Basket intercepted Carver questioning the bartender. “Word from Ser Rhiannon - came with a runner.”

Carver glanced back at Theron and confirmed the elf was safely occupied at a table with food, before facing the sergeant. Carver

remembered serving under Basket once; the balding man hadn't participated in the army's hazing of Carver, but he hadn't stopped it either. Basket didn't appear to have a problem now playing messenger for Carver and the capital, so he was at least professional.

Carver accepted the letter Basket had kept on him, and broke the seal to reveal Rhiannon's tight, hasty writing. Carver wasn't able to read a word before a civilian in the crowded tavern nudged into their space, consequently blocking the nearest light.

"...Carver?"

Garrett stepped closer to him with wide eyes fixed on the slots of Carver's helmet, as if the mage could discern one's identity at will, and with only Carver's muttered name to inspire a connection. Carver inwardly cursed at Garrett's timing. Basket was no country Templar softened by an amicable relationship with a farmer's boy.

Carver was terse. "This isn't a good time."

"Four years of silence isn't enough for you?" Garrett's voice wavered with light sarcasm. "Maybe I should wait for the next blight and check on you then."

Basket looked up. "This your brother?"

"Our father passed away," Carver briskly shared. "Garrett is head of the household now." Because that was the only reason Garrett was still in Lothering while most able men and women were moving for Ostagar. Desertion wasn't taken lightly.

Garrett's chuckle was thin. "So you *did* receive Bethany's letters. Here I thought you couldn't read."

"Send her my love," Carver decidedly slipped a money bag out, "and take this. Bring the family out to the Free Marches, see Uncle Gamlen."

Garrett held the pouch with dazed disbelief, not knowing where to start with the wrongness in Carver's actions. Carver could see the exact moment Garrett felt betrayed. "Since when did you care about Uncle Gamlen?"

Basket shifted alert. "Is the blight that bad?"

"Not if we do things right," Carver coolly addressed, turning away

from Garrett. The older Hawke didn't know that Basket was the local sergeant, and that Carver was Basket's superior. Lothinger couldn't afford a panic. "Just thought Kirkwall could benefit from a family visit."

Garrett spluttered. Kirkwall was the reason why the two of them and Bethany had been raised in armpit nowhere.

Basket leaned on the bar with Carver, fractionally unwinding. "I see. The locals here could benefit from finding more northern land to farm, anyway," he grunted. "Hear me, bartender? You folks should make space for the soldiers coming to Lothinger."

"Spread the word," Carver agreed.

The bartender grumbled, then blinked at Garrett standing in Carver's space. It seemed that Carver was still at risk of being recognised even with his armour and helmet on.

Carver ducked his head and peered at Rhiannon's letter. "Anyway, I'm busy, Garrett. Let's talk another time."

"The next blight then," Garrett surrendered, humour slipping. He pivoted and stalked off with silent anger.

The bartender surreptitiously drifted down the bar, spreading word of the almost mundane event he had witnessed. What was a spat between a local and two soldiers? The only detail of note was the fact that the local involved had been the beloved Garrett, and that the soldiers had wanted to kick the locals out for the army's sake.

Carver exhaled.

Rhiannon's letter at least shared good news. The poor knight in charge of the capital had been forced to arrest Vaughan Kendells for attempting to kidnap and rape a couple elves leaving for Highever, which made for an awkward meeting when half of the Cousland legion rode in to Denerim to warn the Kendells of Arl Rendon's treachery.

The king's army tried to recover from their embarrassment and swore to provide all Cousland servants - elf and human alike - secure travel to Highever, but the Cousland legion vehemently rejected this and insisted on protecting their own themselves. The Kendells legion was meanwhile forced to bow to the king's army and Cousland legion on the matter of running Denerim. It was the first time in history a couple

of elven and human servants were escorted out the capital with a full guard.

With the Cousland legion had also come a clearer picture of the events at Castle Cousland:

Duncan had been passing through Highever to recruit Ser Roderick, a member of the castle guard, when Arl Rendon and his squad had sacked Castle Cousland. Ser Roderick had fallen in defence of the castle, while Duncan had rescued the visiting Bann Loren's family and most of the Cousland family. By the time Duncan had managed to reunite the group with Teyrn Bryce in the castle's pantry, it had been easy to see that their enemies had outnumbered and surrounded them. Teyrn Bryce and Teyrna Eleanor had thus laid down their lives to buy Duncan and the group time to flee the castle.

Fergus and the Cousland legion had fortunately crossed paths with Duncan and the rest while hurrying north, allowing Duncan to split off for Ostagar, and Fergus to retake Castle Cousland with his wife, son, and Bann Loren's family safe at the legion's rear. Fergus had been hurriedly named teyrn of Highever before sending half of his legion to Denerim as promised to Carver, while Bann Loren's family had returned home to spread word of Arl Rendon's treachery among the Bannorn.

So far, Highever was still recovering from the attack, and the state of the Bannorn was a mystery since Ferelden was still in the middle of fighting a blight.

Naturally, Rhiannon's news came with a flip side. Tensions had spiked between the Cousland and Kendells families, and so long as Arl Rendon couldn't be captured, the Couslands and their people had no outlet for their grief and rage. The flawed Kendells of Denerim were a ready target.

Rhiannon was also concerned that in the king's absence, whoever commanded Denerim with the most power could threaten the hierarchical structure of Ferelden's kingdom. She wondered when Carver would return to the capital - or even better, when Teyrn Loghain or the king would.

Carver couldn't give an answer to that, so he wrote to Rhiannon a temporary solution: to pull out the king's army from northern patrols, and have the Cousland and Kendells legions share responsibility over them. Knights of the king's army would remain as their supervisors.

Two squads from the king's army should also be sent to Lothering to assist with population overflow and escort migration as necessary.

While it was unorthodox asking the Kendells legion to help guard highways leading to Denerim instead of guarding just Denerim itself, "maintenance" of like roads fell under an arling's duties. Not all of Ferelden's roads were left to the Couslands and Kendells either, since there were still the mercantile routes around Lake Calenhad, and portions of highways like the southern half of the West Road. The distribution would occupy the Couslands and Kendells from lashing out at each other, and allow Rhiannon to focus on doing her job in the capital while keeping an eye out for Arl Rendon. Carver mentioned he'd also ask Loghain for advice on the matter and forward the commander's response to Rhiannon when able.

Carver sent his letter with a runner, before he glanced back at Theron. The Mabari Madness tonic cured a mabari of the taint for at least a year, based on a certain dog's journey in another timeline, but Theron was the one and only experiment for the tonic working on hominids.

Given the tenuous link between the tonic's efficacy and a patient's magical bloodline, it reasoned to say that the tonic fed to a dog could delay the taint by fifteen *dog* years, and thus if fed to an elf could delay the taint by fifteen normal years. However, it could be equally likely that having too much "magical blood" was like having a metabolism that was so high, a medicine's effects would be diminished or negated. In which case, it was possible for the tonic to be effective for one year for mabari, and effective for merely one-fifteenth of a year for elves. The uncertainty was compounded by Carver's near-negligible modern medical knowledge from his past life, and the fact that he was essentially working with *magic*.

Even while Carver wanted to pursue a few threads of interest in and from Lothering, Theron - in the unpredictable state that he was - still had the Imperial Highway to cover.

A headache flirted with Carver's focus.

"Basket," Carver summoned, "I heard concerning news on my way here. The Guerrin legion is delayed from marching to Ostagar?"

"Yes, ser," Basket readily replied. "Arl Eamon apparently fell ill. He sleeps and takes in drink like a man in slumber, but he won't wake up."

Between the rumours, Eamon's marriage with an Orlesian, and the

arl's letter to the king, Eamon was easy to dye with suspicion. One could assume he was partial towards welcoming Orlesian forces into Ferelden; as the king's uncle, they could be the Wardens whom Cailan wanted, while as the king's uncle who believed he knew better, they could also be the chevaliers whom Celene wanted. Thus in the time leading up to Loghain's departure from Denerim for Ostagar, Carver had gauged Loghain's mood towards Arl Eamon and had kept an eye on army mail in and out of the capital.

Without Rendon Howe whispering in Loghain's ear, Carver had eventually come to believe that Loghain wouldn't feel compelled to pursue an extreme measure and have Eamon drugged into a temporary slumber, until such a time that Orlesian forces were certain to not enter Ferelden at any moment.

Now, Carver doubted not just his judgement, but his own senses. Had he missed a sign in Loghain's behaviour, no matter how subtle? Had Carver allowed himself to balance too many issues to keep an eye on, and missed the sign even if it had been obvious? Was Eamon merely fated to catch an illness in the spring? Carver hadn't noticed strange behaviour within the king's army before and after Loghain had left the capital, so it was difficult to determine if the arl's illness was a product of external influence or mediaeval hygiene.

The pressing mystery was just one thread.

Another was Carver's reluctance to leave things as they were with Garrett, and by extension the rest of the Hawke family. There were still many other threads Carver wanted to personally pursue, but Carver ultimately directed his resources to his highest priorities.

"Send two soldiers to Redcliffe," he ordered Basket, mind racing to justify the command. "Have them check on the health of Arlessa Isolde and Lord Connor. If they return with any observations of note, write to me."

Carver dismissed Basket and searched for the tavern owner. If he allowed himself one of the grim thoughts he kept boxed away, he knew he might not need his possessions after Ostagar, so he had the tavern owner promise to send a message and the rest of Carver's money to the Hawkes.

Carver said to emphasise that he loved his family and wanted them safe north of Lothering, and though the affection was hollow without direct communication, Carver had to make do. Seeing the Hawke



family in person would have meant a sombre sit-down conversation that would have lasted for days that Theron couldn't waste. Carver was fond of the Hawkes, but he couldn't play favourites in the current circumstances.

Without staying to rest, Carver and Theron mounted horses of the king's army and put any regrets and Lothing behind them. They had to.

X

Their arrival to Ostagar was anticipated by the last person Carver expected.

"Ah...ser." Duncan saluted in greeting. "I sensed your approach."

"Theron," Carver ignored, "Warden-Commander Duncan. Warden-Commander, Theron Mahariel."

Scattered patrolmen marked the edge of camp, blanketed by quiet provided by their sparse numbers and open hilltop air that was obstructed by so few stone pillars, the wide sky seemed to press down on the naked ruins of Ostagar. Even as soldiers trickled into the nearby Tower of Ishal, their whispering armour barely registered to Duncan, Carver, and Theron as they stared at each other.

"I see." Duncan blinked at Carver's bluntness.

Carver crossed his arms. "Wardens can sense the taint, can they not?"

"We also decide if someone is worthy of joining our order," Duncan returned. He looked at Theron. "The Dalish are counted among some of the proudest warriors in our history. I hadn't expected one of your people to come with a soldier of the king's army."

Theron inclined his head. "...Carver is fine company."

Introvert. So *silence* was fine company.

Carver didn't shift his weight. "Will you save Theron's life or not?"

Duncan neutrally hummed. "I take responsibility for his life, and no more. Walk where you must, ser."

The Joining was a secret, so it was true that Duncan could make no promises or explain himself. Carver knew when he was dismissed.

Theron snatched Carver's elbow before he could pivot off. The elf shifted. "Carver...thank you again."

"You'll live," Carver assured - *stated*, like it was fact. "I meant it when I said you might have the strongest will in Thedas. Joining the Wardens, facing a blight - you'll see your next birthday and reflect on this moment with pleasant vagueness. Your future is ahead of you, Theron. It always has been."

Theron's ears twitched, his anxiety seen through. "You seem to know much, for a human."

"Take care, Theron."

They exchanged heavy glances before parting ways. Carver almost missed a faint smile on Theron's lips.

X

Loghain wasn't pleased by Carver's arrival - both his absence from the capital, and his tardiness to the front line.

"Ferelden shan't suffer the stumbling of fools," Loghain said, clipped. "If two arlings prove allergic to reason, then one must force-feed it to them. I'm sending Ser Cauthrien back north."

"The captain?" Carver quirked a brow.

So long as "the king's army" encompassed all of Ferelden's legions, Loghain was the army's commander next to His Majesty, and Ser Cauthrien led the king's personal legion in Loghain's stead as its only captain. It seemed overkill to send Cauthrien to Rhiannon when the captain's skills would be more useful against darkspawn, and if the blight could end soon, Cailan or Loghain's arrivals might as well be expedited over Cauthrien's. The projection for Ferelden's darkspawn was currently a near future of exile to the Deep Roads, based on the consecutive victories of the king's army and on Loghain's tactical prowess to maintain the consistency.

No one was expecting an archdemon.

Carver slipped his helmet off and shook his hair. Many times had he wanted to protest his superiors' decisions, from Basket to Cailan, but there was a limit to overstepping one's rank. If Carver wanted order around him, he had to remember to respect it. "Shall I prepare Ser Cauthrien's immediate departure for the capital?"

“No.” Loghain flicked a road map on the war table. “Your call was sound. Ser Rhiannon can handle the distributed Cousland and Kendells legions as they are, and Arl Rendon must turn up eventually. Ser Cauthrien has time to ease the change of the royal legion’s command before she rides for Denerim. Inform Ser Cauthrien of her new duties and receive your post from her—“

They were interrupted. When commanders weren’t with their legions, after all, they were in the war tent.

“Pardon,” a man in marked armour stepped in, “I couldn’t help but hear mention of Denerim. *What* has the royal legion commanded of the Kendells and Cousland legions remaining north? I have a right to know of significant changes in my domain.”

“Arl Urien?” Carver identified, and when he looked, received a nod from Loghain permitting Carver to share the news. Arl Urien Kendells was the man who, outside of the royal palace, owned the kingdom’s capital, and who, outside of Gwaren, owned Ferelden’s most profitable sea port. He was educated, cultured, and unafraid to wrestle with mabari like any Ferelden. He was essentially the most influential arl of the north, where Arl Eamon was of the south.

And he was about to be massively disappointed.

“Where should I even begin.” Carver hesitated, and was easily answered by Urien.

“A simple start would be my son.”

Ack. “Very well,” Carver readily answered. “Lord Vaughan has been arrested for sexual assault.”

Urien stilled. “That boy dares blemish the family name?”

Carver ignored Urien’s priorities and continued with a blank face. “As for the entire situation: Arl Rendon’s murder of Highever’s teyrnir, his siege of Castle Cousland, and his currently unknown whereabouts have forced the Couslands to be wary of even those they once explicitly trusted. Ser Rhiannon of the king’s army in Denerim has extended additional rights to the Cousland legion on the promise they assist the skeleton crews patrolling the highways and protecting Denerim, which the Cousland legion has so far answered with trust. At the same time, within days of Teyrn Fergus Cousland’s ordered recollection of all Highever loyalists, Lord Vaughan attempted to sexually assault three Highever servants and obstruct their ability to

leave Denerim. Ser Rhiannon has been forced to assign separate highway patrols to the Cousland and Kendells legions for everyone's safety."

Urien spluttered. "Then...who runs Denerim!?"

"Presently, the king's army," Carver calmly replied. "Teyrn Fergus is focused on securing Highever, and the Bannorn nobility that are left from those who have marched to Ostagar have proven difficult to contact."

Loghain blinked at the last two bits. The royal family technically had no jurisdiction outside the palace regarding Denerim, and it went without saying that a queen's influence over the king's army typically applied only in peacetime, when she shared control with the king over the army as the royal palace's protection. If Anora's name was attached to the king's army that had invited the Cousland legion to briefly control Denerim's escorts and that was currently ordering the Kendells around, Anora could be accused of tyranny at worst.

Between that and the news Carver carried, the kingdom's entire nobility was essentially too occupied to sense the empty capital or act on it. The king was needed now more than ever to return to his throne, but Cailan was still fighting with his army against darkspawn.

Carver had basically admitted that Ferelden currently had a power vacuum, and no one had noticed.

Of course, this was all from a certain perspective. No Ferelden considered Ser Rhiannon's unopposed influence from the capital as military rule, especially since Loghain's devotion to Ferelden's value of freedom reflected well on those who served under him. Therefore, Denerim, the seat of power, *seemed* to be "unclaimed." Carver also had faith in Queen Anora's political sense to continue maintaining Ferelden's state of affairs from behind the scenes. In wartime where informed centralised power encouraged efficiency, Carver preferred this temporary "military rule."

From an intellectual standpoint, it was better than Carver could have hoped for. After all, he had originally been prepared to address certain interests in the Circle of Magi and Orzammar, and leave Denerim in the hands of his superiors. Instead, Carver's deal with Oriana and his prioritising of the little people had led to Vaughan's arrest and the Couslands' assistance with Denerim's security, and Carver considered the protection of elven servants from rape worth the threat of military

conflict between three noble houses. Ferelden's nobility had already been unstable long before Carver had arrived.

If Carver had to cut it down, his losses were ultimately the unknown but depressingly imaginable situations of the Circle and Orzammar. The burden of seriously acknowledging every ripple of his actions would otherwise drive him insane.

Urien shared Loghain's impression of the kingdom's situation. "My idiot son dares *lose control* of Denerim!?"

Carver didn't respond to Urien's expectant, intense expression. At the end of the day, Carver's duty was to share information, not opinions, and he had stated all the relevant facts concerning Vaughan Kendells' situation...and none of his personal analysis. Carver's judgement was validated by Urien quickly dismissing his existence with a gaze that glossed over as the arl sighed and pinched his nose.

"I must write letters," Urien excused himself to Loghain, and pivoted out of the tent.

A pocket of silence returned to Loghain and Carver.

The seasoned commander between them murmured lowly. "It sounds like the north needs you more than the south."

Carver didn't hear a question, so he didn't answer.

Loghain looked at him. "There is respect in the quill as there is in the sword, Ser Carver. Anyone can pick up a blade; not so wit."

"Let the mabari have respect, Teyrn," Carver curtly replied. "I shall not leave Ostagar regardless."

Loghain wasn't impressed. "I shall pretend that you are not the dunce you seem determined to imitate, and assume you know where you are best served. Enlighten me, then, why you wish to wield steel for the king even knowing this."

Carver sighed. Without sounding crazy? "The royal line is Ferelden's lifeblood. I would be honoured beyond description to protect it."

Loghain stared at him with a frightfully unreadable gaze, before the teyrn appeared to come to a conclusion. "Inform Ser Cauthrien of her new duties and receive your post from her. Dismissed."

Finding Cauthrien proved as difficult as when Carver had navigated his way across camp for the war tent. The southern ruins of Ostagar's fortress were occupied past its limits, so that legions under different banners spilled out into the Korcari Wilds around them. A fence of wooden spikes separated the southern face of camp from the direction of the darkspawn infestation, while the northern end of the fortress was starkly vacant save for the soldiers preparing the Tower for signalfire, and the patrolmen guarding them.

In the fashion of Cailan's impressionability, the king's tent and the war tent stood at the foot of Ostagar's fortress among the commoners. The fenced area of camp was crowded, but Carver had little trouble locating Cailan.

The king was chatting up soldiers and wardens in the latter's huddle of tents with ease, as if Cailan was a born beam of sunlight. The crowding around him markedly differed from plain tightness, as Fereldens were drawn to the king's easy confidence, and the Wardens had no hardship being amicable with him. Carver passed a quartermaster, a servant elf, and a lay sister before he reached the halfway point of camp and picked out Maric's Shield uphill. They were settled in Ostagar's loggia.

"Ser Cauthrien," Carver called.

The captain was accepting a report from Ash Warrior scouts. She nodded to the courier and glanced up at Carver's arrival. "Ser Carver."

"Orders from Teyrn Loghain." Carver slowed to a stop and passed Rhiannon's letter. "Brief Nails for succeeding in your role. You're wanted in Denerim."

Cauthrien opened the letter to be greeted with paragraphs of tight writing, and shuffled it under the scout report. Carver handled small details; Cauthrien only worked with the big picture. "Received. Fetch Ser Nigel from the Warden recruits - I understand the Grey Wardens recently conscripted a knight, a cutpurse, and a mage of noteworthy features. Return here for your post when you're done."

"My post...?"

"Will be assigned on your return." Cauthrien looked at him flatly.

Hurry up and wait, essentially. Carver saluted and ran to cross the

entire camp again. That darned Nails - why couldn't the knight flirt with a Chantry sister? Then he'd be at the sacellum or infirmary instead of the front of camp.

At least Cauthrien's comment enlightened Carver on the path Duncan had taken out of Highever. The warden must have followed the eastern road by Lake Calenhad for Ostagar, and passed by the Circle Tower to recruit a mage on the way. Carver already knew from his past life that the knight and cutpurse whom Cauthrien had mentioned were Ser Jory and Daveth. They were two examples of people Nails hadn't pursued before, but there was a first for everything.

"Hey, you!"

Carver turned. Was that...Bryce Cousland's youngest? "Ser Elissa," he greeted.

The youngest of the late teyrn's children tilted her head at Carver as she approached. She stood tall and broad-shouldered, with a waterfall of brown hair past her neck. A shield and sword hung strapped to her. "You've passed me twice wandering through the Wardens' tents. You looking for Warden-Commander Duncan?"

Carver closed his mouth, bewildered. "No, that's - I was looking for the warden recruits, if you've seen them."

She gestured. "Then you found us."

"...Us?"

"Well," Elissa revealed a small bonfire behind her, "there's me, then Faren Brosca, and Solona Amell. Duncan recruited us. I understand we have one more in number, but he's off fetching Warden Alistair."

A red-haired dwarf with a tattoo under his eye dispassionately flicked a gaze up from where he sat sharpening a knife, and a black-haired mage next to him timidly nodded in greeting. Carver whipped his gaze back to Elissa.

A knight, a cutpurse, and a mage.

*Maker.*

Chapter End Notes

Updates are going to start slowing down, but due to real life and

not a lack of motivation on my part. I love reading everyone's comments! If I could download my thoughts straight into a Word document without need for proofreading, all of my fics would update a lot faster, haha. Unfortunately, we don't live in that timeline.



# Ser Carver

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Elissa patted Carver's shoulder, unaware of his mental blue screen. "You look...familiar. Have you passed through Highever before?" She was sporting the Cousland heraldry on her armour, which gave away her identity.

Carver hesitated. "Maybe once."

"Wait, I see it," Elissa grinned. "Solona looks like she could be your cousin from Rivain."

Hm. "She is."

Everyone spluttered.

"Or Antiva, I'm not sure."

Solona timidly gaped. "Y-You know I'm your cousin, but not where I'm from?"

Carver shrugged. "We're related through our matriarchal parentage. I know admittedly little of Revka Amell and even less of your father, save that they reluctantly shipped you to the Circle before I was born. I recognise our relations by virtue of merely your face and name."

At first sight, he had nearly called the mage recruit "Bethany" before catching himself, and he wasn't easily mistaken as Bethany's born twin. Solona shared Bethany's sweet face and dark hair, as if Bethany's mirror was pointed Carver's direction. The only differences between the two girls was Solona's northern blood darkening her skin to a smooth, milky chocolate, her thick hair being worn back in a long braid, and her electric blue eyes.

She was beautiful like a sheltered flower. Carver was tempted to kick half of the camp out for her safety, just in case, but had to remember that no matter the personality or appearance, every candidate for Warden was capable of taking on a blight and winning.

"I remember now!" Elissa placed her fist on her palm, drawing Carver's attention. "You were running a message at Castle Cousland,

yes? Quite the task for someone from the capital. I was just your age when I was squiring under my father. Then I won my first battle against pirates in the Waking Sea.”

Carver blinked. “But wouldn’t that...?”

“My mother is retired.”

“Very well.”

The Soldier and the Seawolf was a famous shanty, and Loghain and the king’s army *had* searched the seas for Maric for two years. It was a wonder that with such a horrible first meeting so as to be immortalised in a song, Bryce and Eleanor Cousland had not only married but had had two children. Carver was half-surprised they hadn’t had more.

“Speak freely, page,” Elissa encouraged. “What message have you to deliver?”

Carver wasn’t a page, but...ah, well. His inconvenient attention span was curious about the dwarf Faren, yet duties had to come first. “Less a message for the recruits than for their company. Know you a Ser Nigel? Or a Daveth and Ser Jory, for that matter?”

“Daveth?” The dwarf, Faren, perked up. “Yeh, plenty of them Daveths here.”

“It’s a common name on the surface,” Solona shyly informed. “As for a Ser Jory, I admittedly know no such man.”

Elissa shrugged.

Carver pinched his nose bridge. “What of a man named Nails?”

The three recruits’ faces immediately darkened.

Carver sighed. “May I ask—?”

“That way,” they pointed.

“Many thanks.”

Carver quickly left and eventually found Nails dancing his brow at an Ash Warrior. The painted scout was starting to glare at Nails from across camp.

“That’s right, I’m looking at you.”

“Nails.”

“I think the man’s mabari is playing wingman for me, Ser Carv.”

“You’re going to lose the one thing you take pride in. Or, two things.”

“How was the capital?”

“Ser Cauthrien needs to brief you on a new position.”

“Sweet Andraste.” Nails immediately turned. “No really, *bride of the Maker*, Ser Carver. *Me* in charge of the legion?”

“I’m just as horrified.”

“Truly.” Nails briskly followed Carver back to the legion’s loggia. Nails’ casual and professional faces were like night and day. The crowd hastily parted where they walked, persuaded by Nails’ dark expression. “Report,” he barked.

Carver was quickly tiring of repeating himself, but it proved to be a persistent part of his duties ever since joining the king’s army. He gave a brief rundown of the Coastlands’ situation.

Nails frowned. “Then the captain *is* needed back north. What about Little Billy or Princess?”

“You have more mission records of leadership.”

“Maker.”

Everyone including Nails had already expected him to succeed Cauthrien as captain, but before Carver’s arrival to Ostagar, the entertained possibility had been a distant future. Now Nails was going to have his first taste of commanding soldiers who had been in the king’s army since Denerim - the officially labelled, “royal legion.” Nails would also be doing so with little guidance, as Loghain was currently commanding a dozen legions at once, and Cauthrien was to be occupied in the capital. It was a trial by fire afforded by the blight. Carver didn’t envy him.

They found Cauthrien quickly and received their new posts from her. Cauthrien handed Nails a heavy stack of papers and pulled Carver aside.

"Take this." She handed him a longsword bearing the crest of the king's army.

Carver purposefully misunderstood. "To whom?"

"Yourself," Cauthrien stated flatly. "Stop parading your unmarked armour around; we're not a militia, and you're not a harmless little boy. I need you proper."

"Then I'd be too efficient."

"Do I hear cheek, Ser Carver?"

"Help the quartermaster, report at the end of the day," Carver listed off his new duties, and saluted. "Copy."

X

Carver replaced the forgettable sword slung over his back with the marked sword Cauthrien had given him, and eventually found his target stringing requisition orders together while sitting on a chest. Carver looked down at him.

"Quartermaster?" he prodded, like he had to ask.

The bearded man glanced up at Carver's unmarked armour, unable to see the marked pommel of Carver's sword from where he sat. "...I'm busy."

"Then we both are. Ser Carver of Maric's Shield. I've been assigned to you."

"Sweet Andraste," the man stumbled to his feet, "I asked that lady captain for help, not - Maric's Shield! You lot are the elite of the army, aren't you?"

"You're addressing the needs of fifteen-thousand soldiers, healers, and staff," Carver reasoned. "Ser Cauthrien recognises the importance of your work, so she sent me to expedite the process. Not to worry - I have experience with requisitions and running messages. Should you require rare items, I can gather them as well." The soldiers guarding the fence were all members of the royal legion, so they'd let Carver slip out if asked. "Just don't ask me to fetch something native to the deeper bogs of the Korcari Wilds."

The quartermaster gaped at the news, and blinked at the tail-end of

them. “What, are witches of the wild real?”

Carver grimaced. “I’d simply rather not tempt fate.”

His suppressed anxiety would have liked it if Flemeth was merely a batty old apostate, and not host to a vindictive elven immortal with a deeper understanding of magic than anyone currently alive. Carver had no desire to have his strange existence explained soon - or worse, to have said immortal elf seeing him and his knowledge as a threat, and killing him.

“Fair enough.” The quartermaster nodded. “The Ash Warriors need a pound of deathroot, and the Revered Mother needs needles - at least a dozen of them. The rest of the orders can be handed off to an elf. Actually, if you see a red-haired one, send her back here. She should be done with the chainmail by now.”

“Servant.”

“Sorry?”

“*Elf* is an identity. *Servant* is a job description.”

“I guess.”

Carver sighed. Some people wouldn’t understand without a more roundabout approach. “At least one of the Grey Wardens here is an elf. It is in the army’s best interests that we avoid careless comments, so mind your tongue.”

“Oh! I...I understand now, ser. Thank you.”

Carver inwardly grimaced, but merely nodded and left to scour the camp for deathroot. Someone else had been a “minority” in their past life, and they found standing on either side of racism predictably unpleasant. Experiencing a brush of it in Thedas stirred a sense of righteousness in them that they struggled to contain, intimately aware that there was a time for action and inaction where the latter was smarter more often than not.

Being “smart” in Thedas was just one of many hurdles that someone else had to face while trying to live in a foreign world. They swallowed the indignance down. Emotionally distancing themselves helped. No, it was sometimes necessary, if they wanted to be calm.

Maybe the Carver that others knew was awkward, or aloof, or cold.

Someone else didn't know.

Regardless, Carver fulfilled the more dangerous requisition orders and intimidated insignificant requests away from the quartermaster until sundown, when the army started gearing up for the coming battle. Carver had snooped around the Tower of Ishal at one point under the guise of fulfilling a requisition order, but couldn't determine where the darkspawn were likely to dig through, so he had tossed a few comments to Cauthrien and Nails. One of Nails' first orders to the army was thus to add a few Maric's Shield members to the Tower's security. Cauthrien also decided she wouldn't head north until after the battle started, just to momentarily gauge Nails' performance under pressure, so Carver entertained the hope that the battle wouldn't end with a slaughter.

He had unsteady hope.

After all, one common person alone couldn't easily prevent a massacre.

Carver caught a glimpse of the war council meeting on the eve of battle. Nails wanted to know when the meeting looked ready to end, so that he could ready the royal legion to move ahead of time. Carver arrived at the fenced edge of the war council in time to see all of the army's commanders standing around a table that had been moved outside for the occasion, along with Loghain and Cailan.

It was a crowd of impressive armour. Theron, Elissa, Solona, and Faren were also present, behind Duncan and near the king, but they didn't seem to be addressed much. They shifted uncomfortably at Cailan and Loghain's frank exchanges while the commanders around them didn't so much as blink at their leaders' conduct. Carver inwardly sighed at what he could pick up.

"...Too dangerous for you to be playing hero on the front lines..."

"...Wait for the Orlesian forces to join us, then..."

"...Fool notion..."

"...You will remember who is king!"

Neither Cailan nor Loghain were wrong, but they had different goals. Their language was accordingly...tense.

"...Light the signal..."

“...Wise to rely on these Wardens so much...?”

“...Enough conspiracy theories...”

Duncan’s voice, then Loghain’s.

“...*No sign* of dragons in the wilds...”

Cailan’s easy tone, then Duncan’s resigned one. Uldred’s aside, quickly sniped by the Revered Mother. The war council quickly devolved into an argument from multiple angles.

“Enough!” Loghain’s voice cut through the din. “This plan will suffice....”

Cailan’s improved mood, scattering the tension like magic. A focused, if boring, tone captured the meeting.

Carver slipped away to return to Nails.

“Great. Everyone to their positions!” Nails’ voice rang out in the loggia, and the royal legion moved out in formation. Nails glanced back at Cauthrien’s approving nod, then turned to Carver. “You’re in the back with the mages.”

Carver jolted. “Nails— permission to speak freely, ser?”

“Denied.”

No way. Carver had to walk with the king - he had to *protect* him. Carver looked at Cauthrien. “This is because I’m the youngest one here, is it?”

“There aren’t enough Templars to protect all the mages,” Nails commanded Carver’s attention back to him. “Carver. You can’t undermine me like this.”

Carver knew that. He knew that going around Nails would diminish the legion’s respect for the acting captain before even entering the battlefield. Carver hung his head.

Nails’ posture loosened with wordless sympathy. “Dismissed.”

Carver half-heartedly saluted and left.

Thunder rolled in the distance, and the first drop of rain fell.

The king's army went into position and followed its leaders' guidance.

It was a good plan.

The signal was lit on time.

Carver knew so, when he and the Templars surged forward with the pincer attack to protect the mages, just in time to watch a blast of lightning cut through their buddies next to them.

Darkspawn rushed into the army's gaps like water, and thunder clapped above as another spray of lightning stitched the air between ground and sky. Carver couldn't compute the number of casualties created in that instant as he lost sight of half the army. An arc of lightning must have also found the oil barrels deep in camp, because the southern ruins behind everyone suddenly burst in flames. A Templar frantically smote a mage casting fire on accident. Carver pushed between them before they could further act, and in his inattention received a blow from an ogre's swing that tossed him into a herd of soldiers like a bowling ball.

Armour dug into Carver's soft joints, and lightning flashed behind his eyes. He struggled to find his feet and soon learned that the soldiers with him were likewise stumbling, disoriented and weighed down by thirty pounds of leather and chainmail, if not armour. He saw a soldier free his head of his helmet and gasp for air, before a darkspawn's sword cut clean through his neck. The headless body slumped back into the human rat's nest Carver was part of and rained blood on all passersby and the ground in front of it. Another ogre's swing tossed up a flurry of Ash Warriors and mabari, and when Carver freed himself of the mob, he regripped his longsword with one hand and swung it at the ogre's back, only to cut a darkspawn beyond his periphery instead.

He didn't remove his helmet.

He stood up, stepped over a dead body only to accidentally crush its hand, and kept swinging.

Darkspawn flooded in from all directions and crawled over both allies and enemies like ants, so that the three feet between the edge of Carver's sword and the ogre's hide seemed to take forever to close. Wherever Carver stepped, he couldn't find even footing, and every inch back found the battlefield one limb taller with the dead piling up.



Carver turned to cut down a darkspawn throwing itself at him, then a hurlock tearing someone's arm off, then a bare foot the size of Carver's torso kicking back at him.

A wound split the foot's sole before Carver realised he had cut the ogre.

A body then abruptly shoved into him from the side, and he and a darkspawn blinked at each other while a knight beyond them leapt up through the smoke and rain and drove a sword into the ogre's chest. Carver stumbled back in time to witness the dead ogre tip over and crush the darkspawn with its back, one inch short of flattening Carver. He reflexively blocked an incoming swing and turned to face another darkspawn, while a second horde swept over the ogre's body and hit Carver, the knight, and what he could see of the army around him. Carver didn't have time to survey or even watch his back.

He fought with his life on the line behind every swing.

He fought, and fought.

And fought.

He was distantly aware of a world beyond his sword, but couldn't afford to think about it. Trees fell, comrades fell, and darkspawn flooded in. A rain of stone crashed over the battlefield, and Carver instinctively turned over his shoulder for a split second as he stumbled with the knock of a brick, catching sight of smoke, fire, and - with a flash of lightning - the outline of a leathery wing.

Thunder slammed into Carver, knocking him to the ground.

He hastily got to his feet knowing he'd die quickly on his back, and shook the rain out of his eyes in his helmet. That was not mere thunder. Ostagar's fortress was being torn apart.

The archdemon was wreaking havoc.

Carver intercepted a blade for his heart and kept swinging, fighting, breathing.

He fought for one hour.

Two.

He didn't know anything else, until finally, it all faded away as he

collapsed.

X

The thunder had a melody.

It wanted to go home.

X

Someone else breathed in—

X

Carver awoke to the living picking themselves up from the dead. Around him, warriors bloody and bawling like newborn babes surfaced from the unblinking mounds of soldiers, darkspawn, and ogres that had replaced the landscape. Fire burned in patches where broken tents and splintered trees lay, casting an eerie orange glow on the faceless armoured figures that stumbled past Carver, weeping or speechless.

Carver crawled out of a tangle of bodies and tugged his elbow free of someone's grip. Rigor mortis. Dead, for at least three hours. Carver felt like weeping, himself.

The battle's survivors were streaming into the camp ruins. Rain and ash had muddied the earth so that the easiest surface to tread was the fallen stone carcass of the Tower of Ishal, which paved a path from Ostagar's valley to the remains of Duncan's fire. The rest of the tower was mixed with the rubble of the fortress's walls it had crashed against, and no bodies sprouted out from there. Everyone within the archdemon's vicinity had most assuredly perished.

A Chantry lay brother, bless his heart, was calling out to the injured so that he might treat them the best he could, even as a novice healer. Some people were meant for crises.

Broken soldiers pooled around the brother, everyone bloody and not a few trembling. Carver navigated around a handful of soldiers that had shrugged out of their armour to assist the brother, and spied a golden glint beyond broken stone arches. A closer look revealed familiar faces gathered around the war table, the meeting space now a frenzied collection of heraldries on armour.

"Where are the Wardens?"

“Someone stop the bleeding!”

“Wait - don’t touch it!”

Carver cut through the panic to wordlessly grab a soldier’s wrist before they could make contact with Cailan’s tainted blood. Indeed, the unconscious king possessed a pallor Carver had seen only once before, on Theron.

A ripple of soldiers stepped back from Cailan’s body on the table while Loghain’s gauntlets allowed him the protection to continue treating Cailan’s obvious wounds. A few soldiers had caught on and were assisting the teyrn with their gauntlets on, but commanders vibrating with distant horror at recent events were frantically pacing in the background.

“What shall we do? The king is dead!”

“Silence, my lords,” Loghain barked. “Your loose tongues bring us no help. Warden-Commander?”

Duncan was kneeled across from him, cleaning Cailan’s wounds in similar fashion. The warden’s hair was loose from its ponytail and his armour was battered and beyond repair, but he was blessedly whole and coherent. “My condolences,” Duncan said.

The commanders in the back surged forward. “A Warden? You must have a cure!”

Loghain’s lips were curled ahead of them. “Do not toy with me now, Warden-Commander!”

“The ingredients for the Wardens’ Joining were lost in the battle,” Duncan calmly replied. “There is no cure for the taint. You have my sympathies.”

“Keep them,” someone suddenly chirped in the chaos. Heads turned - and stilled at the sight of vallaslin and long ears. Theron stood straight, drenched in sweat and blood and tense with determination. He had all the historical reasons to curse the human race, but he spoke with offered confidence. “There is a temporary cure for the human king, Duncan,” Theron continued to the Warden-Commander. “The same that bought me time to find you. Carver knows it.”

The war council was plunged into silence as a multitude of eyes eventually found Carver.

“Ser Carver,” Loghain curtly identified.

Carver hesitantly stepped forward, wondering what in Maker’s name he was doing there. Just moments ago, he had been in a battlefield, breathing rainwater and drawing blood. “T-Teyrn...my lords...the warden speaks truly but...misguidedly. He refers to the old Alamarri Mabari Madness tonic.”

“It worked for me,” Theron pointed out.

“Aye,” Carver reluctantly agreed, “but that is credited to the magical history running through you, as you are of elven...blood....”

“...And King Cailan is of dragon’s blood.” Realisation dawned on everyone with Duncan’s remark. The Warden-Commander whipped his stern gaze Theron’s way. “Theron, locate the ingredients for the tonic and bring them here right away.”

“Take a squad with you,” Loghain commanded, and a litter of soldiers immediately pivoted to follow Theron out of the council. The commander turned to a group of Ash Warriors nearby. “I know not the details of this tonic - gather whatever tools you must and prepare to treat the king. Spread the news to any surviving Ash Warriors you find. What resources the king’s army has are at your disposal.” The painted warriors solemnly nodded and dispersed, and Loghain faced Duncan. “Where would one find the ingredients for this Joining you speak of?”

Duncan exhaled. “The process is a centuries’-long secret—“

Loghain growled. “If your young warden hadn’t had the intimate understanding of this tonic Cailan needs, I would have banished you this instant.”

“But,” Duncan continued, “the Wardens recognise the necessity of Ferelden’s royal line. The issue lies in the Joining’s key ingredient of archdemon blood.”

The remaining soldiers jerked at the news, and not a few enraged shouts rose at mention of the archdemon.

A commander, Arl Urien, frantically raised his voice over the din. “It matters not! The archdemon flies where our eyes cannot see and our current forces cannot reach!”

“Us wardens can sense the taint,” Duncan shared. “However, so long as darkspawn populate the surface, telling them from the archdemon will prove a nigh impossible task. Teyrn Loghain, we need an army.”

Loghain spluttered. “What forces remaining here must hold the line against the southern horde! We are not so foolish as to mistake the retreat of those creatures as their defeat - and as you say, darkspawn can surface from anywhere across the kingdom now that the archdemon roams unchecked. Ferelden has no spare army to throw in such a massive search!”

“Ancient Warden treaties demand cooperation from all peoples with the Wardens.” Duncan jerked his chin to the side. “Find Alistair.”

A warden by Duncan’s shoulder silently nodded and disappeared into the moving crowd of armour.

“Ser Carver,” Loghain summoned. “How much of the tonic does the king need to buy him how much time?”

Carver obediently moved to the teyrn’s side and kneeled, his movements mechanical. He knew why the darkspawn had “retreated.” After all, the only survivors of the valley were male.

He compartmentalised. He had no use for the ability to shudder.

“One bottle carried Warden Theron through the ten days it took to travel to Ostagar,” Carver reported, “but I cannot speak for its effectiveness over a longer period. Noting the tonic’s effect on mabari, and Theron’s reaction to it, I would suggest feeding King Cailan a bottle of the tonic every one-fifteenth of a year, minimum. That is about...every twenty-four days. If I may, Teyrn, I believe our Ash Warriors have a better hand at determining appropriate dosages for His Majesty than I do.”

The warden from earlier returned in that moment with Alistair propped up between him and Elissa. Alistair’s hair was matted with blood, and Elissa had a bruised jaw, but they were both alive.

“Duncan?” Alistair called out.

“Alistair,” Duncan exhaled in relief, stealing a moment to take in the sight of his ward. “Do you have the treaties?”

There was a moment of wordless synchrony where Alistair minutely inclined his head, and Elissa slipped folded papers out of his pouch at

the same time. Whatever horror the two had experienced, it had been together, and it showed.

“Very good,” Duncan praised. “Alistair, Elissa, I must ask you to gather the peoples of Ferelden into an army and search for the archdemon. Do *not* slay it without first contacting me.”

Alistair’s jaw dropped. “Army— *Not* slay— You want us to *leave* you? Now, of all times?”

“This is not up for debate,” Duncan shut him down. “The king is tainted, and the most grievous of his wounds can only be treated by those immune to the taint. Additionally, the king’s army has suffered losses where us wardens’ ability to sense darkspawn is needed now more than ever. I have no other wardens to spare.”

“Send Richu, or Tarimel - or any other experienced warden!” Alistair spluttered. “Why, Grigor is even straight from the Anderfels!”

“A number of ours have perished, and the rest will help me and the king’s army hold the front line,” Duncan determined.

“—No,” Carver brusquely cut in. “Warden-Commander, you are functional but not uninjured. Your broken leg demands you remain behind the front line with the king, and no closer.”

Duncan leaned a portion of his weight off his left side where he knelt. “...The wound is in my ankle, and not my leg. No matter, your knight is sharp, Teyrn Loghain. I will command the Wardens from the king’s side as I treat His Majesty.”

“Attach one warden to each legion of the king’s army,” Loghain ordered. “Better yet, two if possible - one to sense for the legion, another to run messages. We need to maintain tight communication with the forces we have left, and we can’t afford to lose our runners easily. Ser Cauthrien, accompany the two wardens out of Ostagar—” He suddenly faltered, self-aware. “Arl Urien,” he called.

The arl moved to Loghain’s side as Carver rapidly blinked. Ser Cauthrien? It couldn’t be that she was...the captain was....

“Teyrn Loghain?” Urien answered.

“Return north and demand peace between your family and the Couslands,” Loghain ordered with a rough voice, then cleared his throat. “Ferelden can not afford to be fractured while the darkspawn

declare war. Organise an army out of the remaining Kendells, Cousland, and Guerrin legions - table your differences if you must - and for *the love of the Maker*, control your son."

"Understood." Urien saluted, but remained. "However, Teyrn Loghain, I am obligated to pray you consider reaching out to your queen daughter regarding the continued management of Ferelden. With the king incapacitated, and two armies required to tide the darkspawn influence in Ferelden, one must be concerned about the common folk's reception of a meritless noble grasping the kingdom's remaining reins."

"My *daughter*," Loghain curtly replied, "is plenty capable of ruling a kingdom on her own, and I'll not have you breathe life into rumours *not worth hearing*. I most certainly won't suffer you offering yourself up as the *merited noble*, as it were."

"Between a lack of childbirth or the successful command of soldiers, the people of Ferelden have only one place to invest their respect—"

"Choose your next words carefully, arl—!"

"Fool of a soldier, I am not offering myself!" Urien burst. "I say this as a born Ferelden: the people would feel more at ease knowing *you* were with the queen to lead us through these troubling times. The king's army ultimately needs the Wardens' leadership above anyone else's, and the remaining noble houses would readily unite before a threat to the kingdom. We must thus consider the vacancy in the *capital's* power: what Ferelden's leadership should be like moving forward, and what it will look like when the war is over."

"The king is not dying," Loghain tersely denied.

"At least consider it," Urien pressed. "You and Arl Eamon are the king's uncles, but Arl Eamon doesn't presently grasp these recent events like anyone who experienced them. You have also ruled as regent in the king's stead before."

"Maric was mourning his wife's *passing*," Loghain dismissed. "I know not why I'm still listening to this. Take a squad of your remaining legion here and travel north with haste. Dismissed."

Urien sighed but saluted. "As you say." He left.

Loghain turned to Alistair and Elissa, and the two of them flinched under his thunderous gaze. "...Wardens. You shall travel with the

Kendells legion as far as Lothering, and to the capital if necessary.”

Alistair was still blindsided, so Elissa worked up her voice. “N-No, Lothering is adequate. We must chase after the mages who fled the battle, likely for the Circle Tower.” Or the Orlesian border for protection, if they understood the weight of desertion.

The war council nearly blew another gasket - at the news for some, reminder for others - but Duncan cut in calmly. “Go on and ready yourselves for departure. Maker be with you.”

“And you, Duncan,” the two wardens solemnly replied. Alistair’s lips twisted with emotion like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t resist Elissa leading him away, limping.

The warden that had found Alistair now returned to being Duncan’s silent shadow, while Loghain gave out instructions for a watch guard, an organised search for survivors, and a clearing out of the battlefield so that the army could ready themselves for another assault.

Carver moved to leave Loghain’s side, but the teyrn shot him a look that commanded he stay for a personal word. Carver reluctantly settled behind Loghain with restrained nervousness and checked himself for wounds while he waited. When there was a lull in soldiers frantically seeking clarification and instructions, Loghain suddenly lowered his voice and trained his eyes on Cailan’s wounds he was treating.

“Ser Carver,” Loghain murmured.

A radius of people would still be able to hear their exchange, but Carver leaned in anyway. “Teyrn?”

“What know you of the Grey Warden and the young Cousland?”

Alistair and Elissa? Carver paused, choosing his words carefully. Loghain wasn’t asking about their résumé - he wanted to know if they could be trusted. Even after suffering one of the fiercest waves of darkspawn to be seen in this blight, Loghain was still conscious of possible Orlesian threats, and so far as Carver understood it, the teyrn didn’t have any trusted sources accessible. At least half of them were dead, because Ser Cauthrien had chosen to guide Nails like the good commanding officer she was, and Carver had...

Carver had *insisted* that Maric’s Shield secure the tower....



No. Focus.

“The Grey Wardens’ devotion to seeking and destroying archdemons is unquestioned and unmatched,” Carver replied. “I know little of Warden Alistair, but as an established member of the order, I expect him to be an example of such devotion. As for Warden Elissa....”  
Maker. The Hero’s personality could fall anywhere between lawful and chaotic, and Carver couldn’t even be sure if anyone was the fated Hero-to-be, if there would still be one. He swallowed thickly. “She is as skilled as can be expected of a Cousland. To put it plainly, Teyrn, I trust her to build the army and find the archdemon as commanded.”

And no more. He couldn’t know for sure if such tasks would be accomplished without, for example, slaughtering all mages in the Circle, or spreading the curse of lycanthropy.

Yeah.

Carver sighed deeply. He straightened up when he realised that Loghain’s eyes had turned to him and sharpened into a piercing quality.

There was a moment where Carver wasn’t sure Loghain would say anything. Then, the teyrn looked back at the unconscious king.

“Are you injured?” Loghain asked.

Carver blinked. “No, Teyrn. Merely bruised.” And wet and cold, but who wasn’t.

“Good,” Loghain said. “You shall accompany the wardens on their mission.”

Huh. “Huh?”

“See that they do not betray the people of Ferelden. Send a report through a runner every full moon.”

“Of...which moon?”

“The *first* moon,” Loghain remarked flatly. In other words, the planet’s closest satellite, and fastest. The Moon circled Thedas every month, while Satin circled Thedas every year.

Carver hesitated. “If I may ask, Teyrn; did Ser Nigel survive yesterday’s battle?”

“Him and the rest of the royal legion,” Loghain shared. “...Ser Carver, my command was not a request. Prepare to leave with the wardens.”

“I...copy.”

Maker watch over them all.

## Chapter End Notes

Yes, Thedas’s second moon is named Satin. That is not a misspelling. Thedas’s holiday Satinalia is apparently based off of the Roman holiday Saturnalia. Who knew?

Also, Carver is inwardly freaking out, as one can imagine. In a way, it’s only fair with what he puts people through. However on the other hand, he is currently traumatised, and for plenty of reasons, some of which will be revealed in later chapters. This is called “Someone Else,” and we’re only starting to grow more aware of the kind of person they had been before arriving to Thedas.

Meanwhile, the Hawkes are still largely ignorant of the activities of their youngest, fufu.

>:D

Edit: I’ve adjusted the original army size from one million to fifteen-thousand, per advice from SB. If there are other numeric errors, please let me know!

## Chapter Notes

Can my writing style fluctuate multiple times through a chapter?  
Yes. Goes to show that the music you write to matters!

I'm trying to get back into the swing of writing. Maybe I'll start completing a chapter once a year instead of once every five years, lmao

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Kendells legion was dozens of times larger than the Wardens' party comprising, so far, of two wardens half-freshly-minted, and only Carver to supervise them. The party trekked alongside Arl Urien at the head of the march, for all the horses in Ostagar had been spooked away by the battle. However, the two wardens weren't eyed kindly by their company on the road. Indeed, the Kendells legion, with their dozens, stretched out like a train of ants behind Arl Urien in the narrowing highway path, and had cloying pockets of whispers among it seemed every available ear except Alistair's and Elissa's.

The reason was obvious, illogical, yet comprehensible. While the members of Maric's Shield stationed in the Tower of Ishal must have subdued the digging darkspawn trespassers, the archdemon had still crashed into Ostagar's fortress and toppled the tower. Many good soldiers had died, including those Carver had considered the closest thing to friends. That wasn't even addressing the fact that of the MIA soldiers, Carver knew that the female ones had been taken, not killed by the darkspawn, for breeding purposes.

The only incentive for a horde to suddenly retreat from battle would be to secure stolen resources.

Carver couldn't even ascertain if the Battle of Ostagar hadn't been waged from the beginning just to take women. It was a horrifying thought to consider that the earlier darkspawn hadn't been fighting with the intent to kill. And then after fostering broodmothers and a production chain of darkspawn, how many times more powerful would the archdemon's army be, and how much more lethal without a reason to hold back?

Carver's skin hadn't stopped crawling since the likelihood had struck

him.

He intellectually understood that the Battle of Ostagar had resulted in *less* casualties compared to a situation where Teyrn Loghain would have marched half of the king's army away, and contributed to the deaths and kidnappings of the other seventy-five-hundred soldiers left behind. Under the pressure of the king's full army, even the darkspawn whom Carver had faced had been able to reason that securing resources already in grasp was more valuable than the mere furthering of destruction. Carver just also found himself forced to emotionally reconcile with the magnitude of defeat the king's army had suffered here and now in the timeline *he* was living.

As for the soldiers whispering behind Carver, Arl Urien, and the wardens, the root of their dissent was found in the fact that the few wardens who had survived the Tower were also the sum total of the survivors of the fortress ruins. Naturally, this was in no small part by virtue of the wardens' skills, ability to sense darkspawn, and sheer luck.

However, the number of people who still resented the wardens' survival wasn't zero.

Whenever puffy or weary eyes would drift Arl Urien's way, burning with the desire to vent, the hair on Carver's neck would stand, and he'd peek warily over his shoulder. Fortunately, in Carver's position behind the legion commander and the two wardens, the quartermaster shuffled beside him. The quartermaster had the unenviable task within a tight deadline of acquiring horses to replace the hundreds lost, which rankled the bearded man something fierce, but Carver was nonetheless hesitantly grateful for the officer's presence. Every time Carver glanced back, the quartermaster would slip out of his field of vision, and Carver would instead see the man's expression at Carver's frown reflected on the soldiers behind them:

Mute cowering.

For the soldiers, it was out of wariness, in case the quartermaster's reactions were not unfounded, and the nameless knight marching in Arl Urien's shadow was someone of importance. Disrespect in the army was typically rewarded with physical drills meant to instill humility. For the quartermaster, however, it was from a deeper bewilderment, since the boyish Carver had not only returned from the battle where half of Maric's Shield hadn't, but had also come back merely bruised. Carver wanted to steer the bearded man correctly

towards the fact that Carver had been in the backline and not in the worst of the action, but that would have meant bringing up the mages, as if the glaring legion behind Carver wasn't posing enough of a powder keg.

The march was a perfect formula for cripplingly awkward silence at the front of the line.

Arl Urien, Alistair, and Elissa were oblivious to it.

Carver didn't entertain ideas of changing the fact. He was determined to blend into the background while Alistair and Elissa fulfilled their duty, and spend the rest of his assignment overlooked. He just needed to be able to send letters and run messages of his own.

His success so far was debatable, but the Kendells soldiers behind him at least shouldn't know his name. If they were to remember him, it should merely be for what Nails had once described as Carver's reticent and mildly unapproachable nature. Once Carver was made to speak, however, he was "uptight" and "nerdy." Flattering.

The narrow path everyone was treading finally opened up. Young trees replaced grassless ravines, and the muffled rush of distant water signalled the closing proximity of a river, likely also a town.

That was when a mabari came bounding for the marching soldiers with a jovially open-mouthed smile and lolling tongue. The canine had ugly, patchy fur, a bloody maw, and at least sixty pounds of bone and muscle on it, but Elissa happily knelt in the middle of marching and opened her arms wide in invitation.

"Who's a good boy!"

*"Borf!"*

The mabari bowled Elissa over, before dragging a leathery tongue up the warden's face several times. Carver and Alistair unknowingly grimaced in tandem. Elissa obviously laughed.

"You survived!" she exclaimed. "You returned!"

Alistair, who was closest to Elissa, inched away from the slobbery beast as saliva speckled his boots. "With a friend," he drawled.

Carver meanwhile didn't stare at the raven innocently perched on the mabari's back. He didn't.

The wardens and Carver moved to the side to allow the Kendells legion to march past, but not without Arl Urien glancing back at them - no, he was looking at *Carver*.

Loghain's messenger.

It seemed Arl Urien didn't want to stray to the wrong side of the teyrn's opinions.

Carver contained a sigh and minutely nodded, to which the arl and his soldiers immediately continued marching without a spare glance at the young knight. Not everyone noticed the exchange, and no one seemed to care. Only the quartermaster looked back at Carver twice before rows of armour swallowed him from sight. All the while, Elissa's canine companion enthusiastically demanded the wardens' attention, Carver's wordless instruction flying over Alistair and Elissa's heads.

"Come now, Alistair," Elissa was needling. "You said you've always wanted a mabari."

Alistair spluttered. "You've never heard a joke?"

"My boy will be a well-behaved companion!"

Carver stepped in after Arl Urien had turned away and proceeded marching. "Warden, please stand up. We can't afford a delay."

Alistair and Elissa looked back at him, their lighthearted atmosphere swiftly dampened by Carver's briskness. He turned away from the vanishing quartermaster and stood at rest to stare at the wardens with purpose.

"Agreed," Elissa finally decided, and picked herself up from the ground with a fond shove at her sixty-pound mabari. To her credit, her sociable attitude recovered quickly. "Dog is coming with us."

Alistair tossed a quip and tellingly put Elissa between himself and the canine.

Carver's steps faltered at first.

Dog?

Elissa had named her companion *Dog*?

Carver suddenly wished with unreasonable fervour that howsoever

Garrett would acquire a mabari, he wouldn't name it Boy, Pet, or worse, *Default*. As the trees thinned out to the sight of Lothing, Carver reluctantly concluded he could only pray that Bethany would speak sense to the oldest male of the Hawke family. Perhaps they'd be lucky, and Bethany would only name the beast *Big*.

It had been four years since Carver had last seen his twin, but she couldn't have changed much from his memories, both old and "old." Bethany was playful but sensible, occasionally to a fault.

X

Elissa grabbed a passing soldier.

"Off, Warden – we soldiers are barely managing this sudden overpopulation!"

A Templar.

"I'm sorry, Warden, every Templar is currently needed."

An armoured man wolfing down food in the local tavern.

"Are you the soldier in charge here!?" Elissa demanded, exasperated.

"And eating while I can, get in line."

Relief loosened Elissa's face. "Finally. I have a mission of great importance. I seek the mage deserters."

"You and everyone else," the soldier grumbled.

Carver watched Elissa and Basket lose their tempers on each other from a corner of the packed tavern. Alistair stood behind Elissa's shoulder - who, by his matching Warden's Oath amulet, was an unknowing indicator that the two were Wardens - while Dog diligently cleaned the floor under Basket's table of food scraps. Patrons and servers had to shove past each other to navigate the tavern, and the stationary man, woman, and mabari weren't helping. It was a small mercy that a certain raven had opted to perch outside the tavern door while its usual four-legged mount was indoors. The tavern was so stuffy as to even warrant not wearing a helmet, else Carver felt he would suffocate. The bartender was fortunately harassed by five too many patrons to have the leisure of scanning the tavern's shadowed corners.

A gloved hand held Carver's elbow. "Postboy."

Carver turned, voice low but surprised. "Satin?"

The leather-clad rogue quietly exhaled in relief. His cheekbones were skinned, and other exposed areas of his body were laced with cuts like he had rolled down a rocky hill, but he was alive. "I haven't seen one of us since the tower fell. Basket wants to defer to me, but I don't plan to stick around."

Carver frowned, processing his words. "What are you waiting for?"

"Permission, and before you get smart, I was specifically waiting for your kind." Satin smirked, but his handsome smile swiftly died. "All the Shielders with me had lost to darkspawn or...our own people...the *mates*, by the time we hit Lothering. I can't snatch a runner willing to return to Ostagar, and there is little point in reaching out to Denerim when Ser Rhiannon has less an idea of my next steps than I do. You're the first person of rank besides Arl Urien to step foot here, and the arl can't be speaking to the Teyrn's thoughts as well as a Shielder. Tell me where the war needs me: Jader or Ostagar?"

Carver's brows furrowed. "...Jader, not Lake Calenhad? From the local Templars' busy state, I wouldn't have guessed that the mates had fled politically far from their reach."

Satin nodded. "You would have guessed correctly, according to one of the mates still here. Senior Enchanter, by the name of Wynne. She helped us chase the deserters until Lothering, when the darkspawn on our tail switched targets to the villagers. She and a couple loyal mates are tending to the casualties here."

At Wynne's name, Carver glanced across the tavern. Satin's gaze followed.

"...You're watching the Wardens?" Satin lowered his voice further.

"I'm following them," Carver immediately corrected, but Satin chuckled.

"As you say, Postboy." He sobered, the way members of Maric's Shield did regarding missions of significance and secrecy. Carver wanted to shake whatever assumptions Satin had crafted out of his head. "Looks like you're ahead of the information – as usual. Are the mage deserters somehow a bigger problem than the chevalier legions at the border?"



The *what!*?

Carver pinched his nose bridge.

“That bad?” Satin quieted. “If Teyrn Loghain would want more than one of us at the Circle, I’ll gladly partner with you northward.”

“No,” Carver quickly declined, mind racing through what he knew. “Head south and defer to Teyrn Loghain. I can’t speak for where you’re best served.”

“And leave the chevaliers—?” Satin blinked. “Oh, I see. You got it, Postboy.”

Got what, exactly?

“I’ll depart immediately.” Satin vanished into the crowd.

Got what? Satin!

Carver shut down his internal distress before he could crash. Jader was certainly the closest Orlesian city to a Ferelden border, but for the chevaliers to be sitting there, wouldn’t that have meant some involvement of the Orlesian Grey Wardens? Even if such involvement merely extended to the chevaliers blocking the Wardens from reaching the border, then Carver’s grasp of the political timeline in the west required review.

Elissa patted Carver’s shoulder abruptly.

“There you are, page,” Elissa declared, relieved. “The higher ranks of the king’s army stationed here aren’t proving themselves helpful. Fortunately, a local has offered us assistance. Where to, Sister Leliana?”

A bob of red hair perked up. “Senior Enchanter Wynne is in the Chantry,” the assassin beamed sunnily. “This way!”

“Warden Elissa,” Carver quickly halted the group setting to leave. Curious gazes turned back to him. “I’m...going to grab something quick, so don’t wait for me.” He flushed.

Oddly, Elissa and Alistair merely shared an amused look before the latter nodded to Carver. “I know how insatiable a growing boy’s hunger can be. Just find us in the Chantry.”

The group stepped out of the tavern before Carver could decide how

red he wanted his face to be. That hadn't been one of his better cover-ups, which was enough of an embarrassment, but for the cheese-obsessed Alistair to *pity* him? Did Carver look younger than he truly was?

Carver shook his head. He replaced Elissa's spot at Basket's elbow and reluctantly cleared his throat.

"What *now*?" Basket huffed with a side glance. He stared hard at the fork in his hand before bolting up from his seat and hastily saluting. "Pardon, Ser Carver, the day has been..."

Carver cut to the chase, preferring less attention to himself anyway. "You've been busy. There's a village to the northern edge of the Brecilian Forest, a morning's ride from South Reach. With your soldiers already patrolling the West Road, it would be a small matter to utilise the village for population overflow."

"...I'll prioritise Lothing's civilians," Basket agreed as he caught up.

"If the village residents bring up the Dalish," Carver added, "acknowledge, but don't pursue. The clan that resided close by there should be long gone by now. No need to salute again," Carver hastily corrected.

Basket uncrossed his arms with a frown. "Ser?"

Carver could appreciate Basket's professionalism, but while Carver's helmet wasn't on, and while they stood in the town's tavern.... Hm. "Basket, how many villagers were lost to the darkspawn attack?"

"Three dozen," Basket reported. "Mercifully, ten miners, half of the artisans, and a farmer's family had moved out prior to the attack, per my insistence. Most of the remaining civilians, however, were lost."

"The farmer's family..." Carver's pulse quickened, "the Hawkes?"

Basket tilted his head. "Yes, I believe so. Ser?"

"Nothing. You've done well with what you had. Carry on."

"Speaking of, isn't your family name—"

"Not an uncommon name," Carver dismissed. "I'm leaving Lothing shortly; reach out to Ser Nigel for any instruction Ser Rhiannon can't provide." He pivoted away with his head bowed before Basket could

pursue the query.

When Elissa and her group found Carver, he was standing by the bridge on the tavern's side of the river, gazing at the farmhouses that dotted Lothering's once-fertile land now poisoned by darkspawn blood. His helmet was securely on.

Carver turned at Elissa's voice to see her retinue had grown to include a rectangular, towering woman who wore her wrinkles with dignity and her grey hair in a principal's bun. Dried blood splotched her Circle mage robes a dark brown.

Senior Enchanter Wynne.

"Carver, I thought I said we'd be at the Chantry!" Elissa remarked.

Carver shallowly bowed his head.

"You should have remembered," Alistair gently admonished, "but at least you waited in a public spot. If not, Dog would have had to sniff you out. I think you would have smelled him before he could smell you, though— Yeeouch! Don't hit me, I'm delicate!"

Elissa elbowed him once more for good measure, her lips tellingly quirked.

Aside, Leliana produced a key. "We have one more teammate to greet before setting off," she informed on Elissa's behalf.

The party released Sten from his cage and, with his reluctant acceptance of freedom, departed for Kinloch Hold. When the scenery began to fade from rolling yellow fields to deciduous woods, they came upon darkspawn from underground madly pursuing a rickety horse-drawn wagon. Dog perked up at the distant clamour before bounding ahead for the closest darkspawn. Leliana loosed an arrow into a helmet's eye socket just as Dog sacked a hurlock, exposing the party's location. Both groups rushed towards each other -- and in a blink, the rush was over.

Carver shook his head like a canine, briefly pressing a gauntlet to his helmet. His present awareness still rang with Sten's roar, Dog's growl, the flash of Wynne's magic, and the clash of Alistair and Elissa's shields. Carver hadn't swung his sword once in the brief fight. The hand that was wrapped around his sword hilt trembled with memories of the last time it had drawn a weapon.

“Are you harmed?” Elissa’s voice cut through the forest.

A wooden wagon slowed to a halt for the party, a stout figure turning in the wagon’s box to greet the party with relief. “Save for a good fright, my son and I are fortunately well! Aren’t we, my boy?”

“Enchantment!”

Carver distractedly gestured forward with his free hand. “...Ask them about Sten’s sword.”

He was faintly aware of Sten shooting him a look as Alistair passed on the message, and Elissa projected it ahead. The party was greeted with a negative as they neared the wagon, but Bodahn quickly followed with an invitation to discounted wares in thanks and incentive for travelling together moving forward.

Bodahn was a font of rumour and fact as they traced the southern roads.

The rush of migration from Ferelden’s south saw to the epidemic fear of the blight, which was expanding into a pandemic as merchants carried the news across the Waking Sea and through the Frostbacks. Foreign merchants were already reclaiming their families that were settled in Ferelden to move in with relatives back home.

Hillfolk were also apparently spreading complaints of a Dalish clan in the Southron Hills who were refusing both human and elven refugees due to an ostensible affliction within the clan. With the clan’s refusal to name the illness, it was the common refugee’s struggle to believe that the Dalish weren’t merely building a wall on shallow excuses.

With Gwaren’s natural defences in plutons and the Brecilian Forest, Ferelden’s largest port had fallen silent, either beset by darkspawn or by the sudden evaporation of land and sea trade.

All of these troubles meant that Ferelden’s strongest trade partner was now Orzammar. The Ferelden coin was shifting to reflect the value of Orzammar in the world economy, and dwarven crafts were starting to flood the Ferelden market. Bodahn’s trail of contacts authenticated the reality that Orzammar’s barter system was transforming into one with the Ferelden sovereign as the common currency. This had evidently provoked Orlais, which had placed temporary revisions on import taxes to encourage trade with merchants that the blight had driven out of Ferelden. Popular opinion blamed the presence of chevaliers in Jader on this economic bate.

Oddly, Orlais's actions hadn't frosted Fereldens' opinions of the egocentric empire. Passive disdain for Orlais was already the status quo at this point; recent events were merely another mark on their record.

Regarding the mages, Wynne revealed that Uldred had led the mages out of Ostagar to flee what he had thought was a lost battle, reasoning that the Templars had already proven themselves ready to blame mages for the disaster. The Templar whom Carver had witnessed smite a mage had apparently not been the only example of blind distrust. A number of the army's dead had been mages who had perished under a human blade.

Uldred's retreat could thus be credited for how the king's army had been forced to fight darkspawn without healing or long-range support. Survivors of the battle afterwards also hadn't been able to receive healing outside of the efforts of a single Chantry brother and a couple of herbs. Bodahn revealed that Uldred's declarations had unfortunately been the common public's first accounts of the Battle of Ostagar, painting the southern situation in demoralising colours.

Elissa also contributed to Bodahn's chatter. Carver recalled that a certain noble dwarf route had featured three wardens travelling with Duncan in the Deep Roads, scouting for the archdemon, before stumbling across a certain noble dwarf. According to Elissa's story, those three had been travelling with Duncan through the Coastlands on their way to Orzammar. The three had perished with Ser Roderick in defence of Castle Cousland, while Duncan and the nobles in Castle Cousland had met up with Teyrn Bryce in the castle pantry.

Duncan had apparently given Teyrn Bryce his word he would see the group out of the castle safely even at the cost of his life. However, the nobles around Duncan had been a just sort who honoured debts. The Couslands couldn't have Bann Loren's family pay their debt when the guests had been endangered in the Couslands' own castle, and Duncan had still needed to scout the Deep Roads for the archdemon. Thus Elissa Cousland had stepped forward and offered to be conscripted, assured that her older brother Fergus was still alive far from the sacking. Duncan, Elissa, and the group had managed to flee the castle while Teyrn Bryce and Teyrna Eleanor had bought them time at the cost of their lives.

From there, Duncan had brought Elissa with him to the Circle where they had recruited Solona, then to Orzammar where they had picked up Faren. It was still a mystery what had become of Daveth and Ser

Jory.

Eventually, Bodahn and Sandal split off for a merchant's route tracing River Dane, where the Bannorn and their people could frequently be encountered. The party trekked the rest of their way to Kinloch Hold, guided by the grassy corridors of dried-up ravines from a time when Lake Calenhad had spilled over to River Dane. Now they found their steps softened by soil made rich by a fossilised past.

Carver noted the irony when a distressed traveller lured Elissa and the group into an ambush, punctuated with a felled tree. Along with a ring of highwaymen and the ravine's difficult terrain, the party was now caught in a noose.

An elf among the thieves drew two shortswords, intending to make worm food out of the party.

"The Warden dies here!"

## Chapter End Notes

These A/N's were originally split between the beginning and end of the chapter, so advanced apologies for the wall of text.

**A/N:** A few reasons for my Battle of Ostagar theory you've known by the end of this chapter:

When your Warden first meets Cailan, he expresses doubt that Ferelden is facing a blight, because the king's army is easily defeating the darkspawn who then merely return in bigger numbers. Almost like calculated losing, or recon. But this can't be, because "darkspawn are not clever."

Then the archdemon hits.

When the Warden wakes up after the battle and asks Morrigan what Ostagar now looks like, Morrigan says there are only dead bodies, and darkspawn cleaning the ruins of survivors that they bring back with them underground.

The doomsayer In Lothering says his wife was "screaming as they dragged her away," not as she was being killed.

In conclusion, Carver's internal shuddering is justified in this and the last chapter.

**As for my readers:** I too am looking forward so, so much to a reasonably seasoned Carver reuniting with DA2!Garrett in the thick of things! I actually didn't want Carver to meet Garrett in Lothering in Chapter 4 just to build up the anticipation, but I also needed misunderstandings to arise between Garret and Carver before Garrett left for Kirkwall. Stir in the formation of separate friend groups, let assumptions simmer, and violá! Delicious drama. But since I'm glacial at updating, you guys are going to have to be patient with me. \*sweats\*

Thank you as always for your reviews! Your thoughts mean so much to me!

# "Warden"

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Carver looked down at the fallen elf, his gaze cool and flat. Blood soaked the earth around them. A raven plucked at the shiny possessions of the corpses stacked nearby before flying up to perch on Carver's shoulder, releasing a shrill note like a woman's laugh.

Zevran chuckled. "I surrender?"

Elissa sauntered over, wiping her sword. "I think you missed a spot, page."

Carver didn't look as the party grouped around him. Carver had managed to strike down just one highwayman before finding himself engaged with Zevran. From there, the Antivan Crow had had Carver on the defensive, until finally Carver's desire to live had cut through his inner ghosts of Ostagar and struck at a brief opening in Zevran's movements. The assassin had rapidly blinked at Carver's abrupt transformation before falling unconscious. Zevran had since awoken to all of his hired hands dead, and not a single member of Elissa's party injured.

Carver jerked his chin. "This one singled you out as 'Warden.' Your life is worth more than just a coinpurse to him."

"I'll spare you the mystery," Zevran chirped. "I am an Antivan Crow by the name of Zevran. Or 'Zev' to my friends."

"Try again," Alistair answered Zevran's hopeful tone.

"I'm just trying to discourage my death," Zevran admitted shamelessly. "If currying favour means I may continue living, then I'll be your best friend."

"Who hired you?" Elissa prodded.

"Will you spare my life?" Zevran asked.

Carver caught Elissa's sword wrist before she could get snarky.

Zevran shrugged. "Arl Rendon Howe."



The party immediately restrained Elissa as she exploded into the uncouth tongue of Waking Sea pirates, courtesy of Teyrna Eleanor. Sten stomped over and clamped two hands down on Elissa's shoulders, pinning her in place so she could vainly swing her limbs at Zevran. The air burned with her language.

Carver hastily disarmed Elissa of her sword. "See reason, Warden."

"I'll see reason when Rendon Howe is *dead!*"

Alistair winced as Elissa's elbow glanced his ribs. "That is an assassin, Carver!"

Carver shot Zevran a sharp look.

Zevran quickly caught on and volunteered a winning smile. "I swear to protect you from all harm, until such a time my service is no longer--?"

"*Wynne!*" Leliana cried out.

Leliana caught Wynne as the mage's knees suddenly weakened. The party stilled with Wynne's bleary dismissal of her brief fainting spell.

"The rush of battle just caught up with me," Wynne waved off.

Elissa sobered, her restraints slowly backing off. Carver hesitantly offered her sword back, catching her eye as she accepted.

"The Crow gave you an oath," Carver pointed out. "By Antiva's laws, that is the most sacred contract one can make."

Elissa frowned, her gaze still thunderous. "Rendon Howe--"

"*Warden,*" Carver gravely pressed. "Remember who you are. No Grey Warden has defeated an archdemon without a half-dozen nations behind their back. An *archdemon*. We are facing both the fallen god *and* the darkspawn horde."

Elissa's brown eyes wavered, before finally her lips thinned and she pivoted off. "Relieve the assassin of weapons. Let this blight keep him honest."

Leliana perked up and brightly agreed. Sten supported Wynne, and Leliana collected every hidden blade from Zevran until the elf wore only armour. Alistair reluctantly helped Zevran up. The party followed after Elissa, who had already started down the path with Dog on her

heels.

"My brother's wife is Antivan," Elissa called back to Carver morosely. "I know what an oath means."

Carver sighed as he sheathed his sword, reflecting back on the promise he had kept with Lady Oriana. Elissa couldn't know that an oath was the reason why her brother had survived an assassination.

X

Once, a boy had accompanied his father on a state visit designed to celebrate peaceful relations between a long-standing nation and a newly stable one. Naturally, such purpose had been lost to the boy, and even as a man, only broad strokes of the visit clung to him: the leathery hides of local beasts; arrays of ceramic jugs from the size of his torso to the digit of his smallest finger; droning tours that staggered through his waking hours like the steps of a weathered castle. The foreign kingdom had vastly differed from the boy's wild, coastal home, from its controlled climate to its towering stone structures.

But most curiously, one detail would prove impervious to a child's inattention and the muddling of time; a detail delightfully invasive, participating in almost every aspect of the political gathering like an uninvited yet riveting guest.

For when the boy's focus would slip from his father and the delegates around them, the boy's head would dip, and be captured by mosaic scenes below his feet that spilled seamlessly into each other and down stone steps. Mayhaps he was witnessing a fable, or the chapters of the foreign kingdom's long history. Regardless, there was *life* under his feet that fell across dimensional marks of public streets like an unwrinkled tapestry.

On the final day of the state visit, his father had not brought him along through his schedule; there had been a grand fight to be held in the kings' honour, and though the delegates had fostered a spirited anticipation into the boy, his father had ultimately decided that witnessing the fight was a fortune his son could do without. The boy had been crushed -- briefly, for in his father's absence, local masters of the mosaic art had sat down with the boy and guided his amateur hands through colourful tiles.

He had learned much -- in how *not* to assemble a mosaic.

“You must see ahead of your hands,” one of the masters had chided. “Rarely will a piece come to you ready to be placed. You must shape the tiles as the puzzle in your head waiting to flow out into the stone.”

“It is rare for a surfer to show genuine respect in our practice,” another master had commented. “Most are only interested in our lyrium records.”

“You can record history with lyrium?” the boy had gasped, to which the masters had chuckled.

“You weren’t paying attention for the entirety of your visit here?” they had amusedly noted. “Indeed, we shapers etch lyrium into the Stone in contribution to the Shaperate. Lyrium, however, is a different beast, even in scriptural form. You are better invested in tiles, for now.”

Without planning, colourful tiles wouldn’t be able to fit into the same space — and even with deliberation, special effort was required for a harmonious fit. Similarly, Cailan slowly awakened to voices crowded together like the failed mosaic he had composed as a child.

“Your Majesty!”

“Check his pulse!”

“How much tonic is left, now?”

Cailan poured his strength into blinking, then breathing. “Where—?”

His eyes focused above him, and a dozen weary faces brightly looked upon their king. Soldiers.

Ostagar.

“Maker be praised,” one of the soldiers remarked. “The king is up from the taint!”

“You have Warden Theron to thank,” another soldier shared.

“And Carver.”

Cailan turned his head from where he laid, and sourced the reedy voice to an elf as pale and light-haired as the moon, with a wine-red gaze that seemed to pour into one's soul. Antlers branched up the elf's nose-bridge and forehead in faint, burgundy ink, so that the elf was as a halla among humans. He was an example of a life and culture found opposite of labyrinthine cities above or below ground.

The warden...Theron?

The soldiers continued overhead. "Knowing Postboy, he'd say he was only doing his duty."

Cailan dazedly found control of his voice as Theron and the soldiers chuckled in unison. Cailan could barely speak above their modest noise. "I can't...say I'm surprised...that Grey Wardens...saved my life." He coughed. "Why does...my tongue taste funny?"

Theron tilted his head. "Mabari Madness tonic. It is quite bitter. And it was brewed by more than just myself, Dragon King -- Ash Warriors and your soldiers contributed as well."

"O-Of course."

Theron pressed. "You said Grey Wardens, plural. Carver isn't--"

"Pardon my bluntness," Duncan cut in. The Warden-Commander had been kneeling next to Theron. Cailan blinked at him. "The state in Ostagar has turned dire, Your Majesty. I plea for you to write to Empress Celene regarding the Orlesian Grey Wardens."

To Cailan's right, he easily recognised Loghain frown severely at mention of Orlais, but have enough sense to briskly dismiss the small crowd around Cailan before discussing war plans. When Loghain finally spoke, only Cailan, Loghain, and Duncan remained at the war table supporting Ferelden's infirm king. The activity of other soldiers bustled in their periphery, too busy and distant to overhear royal matters.

It was a strange point of focus for Cailan: the sound of wind rustling the distant peaks of Ostagar's trees. It seemed instead his mind should have been drawn to the hushed war table discussion he was literally in, or the overpowering smell of herbs and death on himself. Anything closer to earth.

"How long...was I asleep?" Cailan croaked.

Loghain supplied a waterskin and slowly tilted it to Cailan's lips. "Not asleep. Tainted. And the foulness is not done with you yet, so conserve your energy."

Duncan propped Cailan up so that the king could converse easier. Cailan noted that unlike Loghain or the other soldiers, the warden's hands were bare.

“However,” Loghain grudgingly admitted, “energy from you is still needed.”

“We need reinforcements,” Duncan began, but Cailan silenced his advisors with an exhale.

“How fares the Line?” Cailan demanded.

Loghain straightened as he stowed the waterskin away. “We have lost a quarter of our manpower, my king. And counting. You aren’t the only victim of the taint, and Calenhad’s blood wars against your sickness even now. I have divided our remaining able forces across the Korcari Wilds in a kennel formation and relocated the army command centre to the hidden clearing you are in now.”

“Kennel...?” Cailan stiffened. “The mabari are natural vanguards; they are best served at the front!”

“The Ash Warriors have suffered the front well enough,” Loghain informed, and Cailan’s blood ran hot then cold in an instant.

A quarter of his soldiers, dead. The fact was starting to sink in.

“I currently have the Ash Warriors focused on running messages and serving as the army’s medical team,” Loghain continued. “Until the quartermaster returns, we must procure supplies from the wilds ourselves.”

“A quarter lost,” Cailan muttered. “And *counting*, due to the taint...” He turned to Duncan. “The Wardens gave me a tonic, and my condition has improved enough to rouse me from unconsciousness.”

Duncan bowed. “Warden Theron, specifically. However, in short, the tonic is only effective with elves, dragonsblood, and mabari; your army must suffer the taint on their own. You must decide for your army what next steps they must take.” He amended, “We must *all* take.”

Loghain nodded. “The Line is yours.”

Cailan was the king.

He held the kingdom’s fate in his hands.

“First,” Cailan coughed, “I demand honesty from you both. How long do I have?”

For once, Duncan and Loghain shared a look in sync.

"I can feel my very blood burning," Cailan exasperated, "and I admittedly fear death as any man, but this..." he winced, "...supersedes my personal fears. I must face the truth. Loghain, I am wedded to your daughter - tell me if I am to widow her as well."

Loghain, whose tongue usually cut with the truth, mirrored Cailan's pain. He seemed repulsed by the very words that left his own lips. "I don't know. I dare say no one else in history has received the treatment you're being given, thus I cannot say with confidence if you'll survive the taint. Warden Theron can only buy you time."

"Time until the Wardens can process you through a Joining," Duncan elaborated. "Then, we pray that the Joining grants you immunity to the taint, and you may keep your life."

"I won't be a Warden?" Cailan asked.

Duncan sharply exhaled. "Ordinarily.... No, I cannot ask this of a nation, that it would surrender its king. The Wardens have only been able to push back blights in the past due to the support of the world's nations. If you survive the Joining, I pray you return to Denerim."

And if Loghain would have his way, never again leave the capital.

"Then my purpose is clear," Cailan determined. His voice was still weak, but he had enough strength to speak without pause. "I will survive this sickness, and I will return to Anora. Ferelden's king won't fall here. Sorry, Duncan; it looks like I can't join your renown order after all."

"We may share a victory," Duncan indulged, eyes glittering. "That said, if you are determined not to set a successor for Head-Commander of the king's army, then I will continue demanding orders from you as such, regardless of your physical state. I firstly need a decision regarding the admittance of Orlesian Grey Wardens."

"I wrote to Empress Celene concerning their arrival." Cailan slowly blinked. "She has surely written back."

"Anora received a response." Loghain's farmhand accent unconsciously, subtly bled through. "The empress has cleared a path for the Wardens to the border – and no doubt readied legions of *bloody chevaliers* on top of *other* soldiers to follow them in while she was at it."

One fact Cailan couldn't immediately recall through his bodily pain was that Loghain wasn't the only soldier in the king's army who remembered the abuse that Ferelden had experienced under Orlais. The empire's chevaliers had been allowed to rape and murder as they pleased, so long as their victims hadn't been Orlesian nobility — which meant the entirety of Ferelden's population. Presently, however, it was just Loghain and Duncan who had Cailan's ear, and between the two men, it was just Loghain who could recall Orlesian occupation first-hand. It was a mistake for anyone to take Loghain's current noble title at face value, and not recognise that Loghain had fought at Maric's side and freed Ferelden as a farmer's son. Loghain had only been granted the rank of teyrn after the war.

Not to say that Ferelden's *nobility* hadn't also suffered from Orlesian hands — like Maric and the royal family, to speak of a few. The *Painting of Rebel Queen* was a famous artwork treasured in Ferelden for a reason. No one wanted to remember Moira Theirin as the head on a pike the Usurper King had proudly displayed at the gates of Ferelden's royal palace, early in his reign.

All good Fereldens, however, knew the nursery rhyme of the Tall King Made Shorter.

Let it not be said that Maric hadn't known how to exact vengeance in equal Orlesian fashion.

Duncan sighed. "My remaining Wardens are stretched thin between the front lines, running with the Ash Warriors, and locating the archdemon. Meanwhile, Warden-Commander Alisse and her order are ready and waiting." He raised a hand, and a couple nearby soldiers noticed and approached. "Your Majesty, I need only a word, and I'll send a Warden to the border to summon them."

Loghain glanced at Duncan sharply. To a suspicious ear, one would receive the impression that Duncan was preying on Cailan's weak state to pursue an agenda.

Cailan nodded. "More Grey Wardens are needed."

Loghain cut in. "Arl Urien is already heading north to gather the Cousland and Kendells legions. With your army at its full might, our current forces in the south need only focus on the south."

"I've long made my decision," Cailan stated, and addressed the group of soldiers. "Summon a runner."

“Belay that,” Loghain commanded, and the soldiers around them stumbled. “Cailan, I will not let you open the floodgates into Ferelden for ten-thousand Orlesians.”

“You will welcome the Grey Wardens of Orlais into Ferelden, and that’s an order.”

Loghain’s voice tensed. “Cailan—“

“This is war,” Cailan recited. “One must observe formality. Now, I wrote to Empress Celene to clear a path for the Wardens to Ferelden’s borders, and she will allow no one else past them.”

“Pray tell, *my king*,” Loghain drawled, “what prevents the empress from sending her *legions of chevaliers* despite your intentions?”

Cailan’s face hardened. “The command of a king.”

They evenly met each other’s gazes.

Loghain bowed first, chastised.

Cailan clenched his fist. He shouldn’t have caught the taint. He shouldn’t have marched south without leaving a child behind. Anora had it right, he should have been more politically aware of himself as a king.

He missed his wife. She was a bold yet delicate woman as sharp as a whip, a blossom in a moving stream that Cailan had chased until they had married, and was constantly chasing even still. Neither of them were certain they were good enough for a child, but they still should have tried — one, two, five years ago. It was a fact that was clear in hindsight.

No matter. The blight was an epic in the making, certainly, but Cailan saw now — between corresponding with the empress and holding the southern line — that the blight was also a stream. And Cailan and Anora were going to navigate it — *together*.

Cailan turned to Duncan and the soldiers. “Summon the Orlesian Wardens, and a runner for the capital.”

X

As the warden's party neared Lake Calenhad, Carver began discreetly shuffling to the side to engage in quiet, erratic conversations with the



homeless. The task proved simple, with the party focused more on their assassin and the road ahead than on the young soldier who followed at the tail end of the group. However, Carver's endeavours soon reached their end, when the warden's party eventually arrived to grudgingly open doors at Kinloch Hold, where conflict had upset all souls into ripples of despair now touching the waters of the next great unknown. Faren's presence split through the tension like divine wind.

"Faren?" Elissa remarked.

"Surfacer? Ack."

Elissa squeezed the red-haired dwarf with ecstatic surprise. "You're alive!"

Faren and Elissa's closeness made Alistair's jealousy leak out. The former templar tersely addressed the weary faces around him. "What happened?"

Faren shrugged out of Elissa's hold, answering for the Templars and mages caught frozen in the midst of arguing.

"I was killing darkspawn going after the mages, who kept running away no matter how loudly I shouted at them. So I kept killing and killing, until I found myself with the mages in this stone tower here." Faren fluttered a hand at Kinloch Hold. "I ran out of darkspawn to kill. I was about to leave, when one of them mages suddenly stabbed himself and started finger-painting with his blood, everyone got into hysterics, and these Templars' solution was to lock the doors. They wouldn't let me leave out the front, so I looked for a back. I found a window about my size at the top of the tower, and enough mages to supply a rope out of their dresses. One of them helped me tie it together."

A nearby grey-haired mage inclined his head. "Warden Faren has been helpful beyond description. The Circle is in his debt."

Faren chuckled. "This surfacer has such a strange devotion to a stone tower. I like him."

Carver pinched his nose bridge at *Senior Enchanter Irving* smiling softly in gratitude to the cutpurse. Faren's alignment was chaotic, *definitely*.

Evidently, Wynne had chased after the runaway mages but lagged behind to treat casualties, including Faren. It explained why the cutpurse had been able to keep fighting all the way to the Circle

Tower.

Elissa stepped back, taking stock of the Templars and mages bearing blades and staves at each other. The Circle's stone walls and floors were freshly painted red. Most damning of all, the tower's doors wouldn't have been locked unless the Templars had intended to perform the Right of Annulment: the unchecked massacre of all tower mages. The fact the Templars and mages were on the verge of reigniting a bloody conflict straightened Elissa's back.

Knight-Commander Greagoir pointed a sword at the mages behind Irving, blind to Elissa's mood shift. "All of you engaged in blood magic — and on top of that, you deserted the king! Your fates are obvious!"

"Hold it, Knight-Commander." Elissa's gauntleted hand separated Greagoir's blade from an old woman hiding a child behind her. "The Wardens need the mages' cooperation. In these dire times, one must heed the Right of Conscription."

"You can't be serious!" Greagoir rejected.

"Of course not," Elissa agreed. "I'm merely selling an idea. The mages may choose between joining the Wardens at high and uncertain cost, or remaining in the Circle and facing the risks they already know. Either way, the Wardens will receive mage help, as the Rights and ancient treaties demand."

The child mage turned to Faren shyly. "What do you think we should do, Faren?"

The dwarf blinked his eyes away from an expensive-looking vase. "You're asking me?"

Unexpectedly, all mages both old and young collectively nodded. "You saved our lives at no small risk to your own. You are a warden, and you have seen the Circle at its worst. You have even navigated the Fade itself and returned alive. We trust your judgement."

A mistake, really.

The mages continued. "What is it like, being a warden?"

Faren watched their faces, then grudgingly huffed. "Joining the Wardens isn't painless, and you always have a wrongness stuck in you afterwards. You can sense darkspawn, but they can sense you, and sometimes your skin doesn't feel like your own. I'll be straight, it isn't

something I'd easily wish on anyone."

"Oh."

"But the surfer Elissa is right," Faren went on. "It's either the danger you know or the danger you don't. Not everyone will survive the 'joining,' but from my understanding, your kind already risks death in a Harrowing."

"In other words," a mage remarked, "we have no choice."

"Not so," another cut in. "After everything we have experienced, is it not wrong to conclude that we always have a choice? We could have stepped away from magic meant to draw blood. We could have stood our ground when Uldred commanded our retreat from Ostagar, like others of our kind did. The Templars likewise have many choices of their own, but we must be better — than them, and our past selves."

A third mage spoke up. "I have suffered in the Circle, but I also remember the outside world before I was found and taken in. For the sake of other mages who might find shelter, food, and clothing here, I do not wish for my past choices to sabotage their future. I say we join the Wardens."

"I can't agree," someone drawled. "I too remember my life before the Circle, and I didn't know suffering until I became a part of it. I would rather change the Circle from the inside for the sake of mages not just in the future, but those standing with us now, here and across Thedas. I'll die or be Tranquiled into a martyr, if I have to."

The mood plummeted. Another mage confessed, "What if I don't know which choice to make?"

With great reluctance, Greagoir lowered his blade, and the Templars behind him followed. Elissa retreated her hand but still stepped between both sides of the conflict.

Greagoir exhaled deeply, like his breath was a precious thing. "Indecisiveness is a luxury only the unimportant or the friendless can afford. Choose this day where you will walk for the rest of your life. You have been a member of the Circle for this long. Act like it."

Faren tilted his head to Greagoir. "You almost sound like you care."

"I speak the same with Irving and my Templars," Greagoir dismissed. His colourless gaze found Irving, unwittingly reminded of the closest

figure in his life to a counterpart.

Irving shook his head and joined Elissa, separating himself from the mages who had followed Uldred or had been swept up in the blood mage's mistakes. Irving had always wanted to live in a perfectly rule-driven Circle. He would soon get exactly that.

"I've made up my mind," a mage spoke up. "I will join the Wardens."

"As will I," others declared. The rest decided to stay with the Circle.

The warden's party stood as the brittle divide between polar factions, fencing off the marginally smaller Circle from the Grey Wardens' new recruits as their side prepared to depart. Carver couldn't gauge his party's morale, but under his leather, chainmail, and armour, he was shivering with cold sweat at the tension.

Wynne approached Greagoir and Irving with irregular boldness.

"Irving." She inclined her head.

Greagoir loosened upon sight of her. "Senior Enchanter Wynne—"

"The Fraternity of Loyalists welcomes you," Wynne continued.

"Baiting the young and ignorant with tomes on blood magic befits the behaviour of those who colour within the lines of the law, at the expense of all else."

Irving's spine curved. "I greet your return warmly, Wynne, but—"

A cutting grey gaze subdued the Senior Enchanter and Knight-Commander where they stood.

Wynne folded her hands in front of her. "In my time in Ostagar, a young mage shared with me her account of a Senior Enchanter condemning a young mage to Tranquility, and a Chantry initiate to imprisonment in Aeonar. Sister Leliana," the sweet-faced rogue perked up, "among the timeless codexes by Chantry scholars, what wisdom have you on Aeonar?"

Leliana gladly delivered. "The body whole, with shattered soul, doth the Imperium's workshop stand. Blackened sister to the stocky watcher, is she made bridewell by the Chant."

Greagoir reddened. "I *have* read *Of Fires, Circles, and Templars*."

"So well-read," Wynne dryly praised, "yet incapable of reading

between the lines themselves. *Aeonar* and *Ostagar* were sites of magical experimentation by the Tevinter Imperium, built on opposite ends of the Imperial Highway. Where Chasind invasions had turned Ostagar into a scouting fortress, Andrastian extremists had made a mass grave out of Aeonar. Left structurally sound but spiritually damaged, Aeonar now serves as a Chantry prison for accused maleficarum and apostates.”

The blood drained from Greagoir’s face in realisation.

Irving regained his voice. “I had intended to make an example for the sake of our Circle.”

“*Your* Circle,” Wynne returned, “can recite the Chant from cover to cover, but cannot put words to the touch of grass. *My* Circle spreads wisdom, so that we may trust a mage who leaves the tower to gain knowledge and return to share it. Where is Jowan?”

Irving sighed. “The Tranquil perished in the fighting.”

Wynne’s wrinkles deepened. “...Retract your sentence against Chantry Initiate Lily, and see to her release from Aeonar. You cannot undo the girl’s experience in our worst prison, nor her loss of a lover twice-over — however, no good can be done by keeping her there.”

“It will be done.” Irving had been reduced into a sullen statue at this point.

Wynne turned her gaze to Greagoir. “With this, I accept the position of First Enchanter.”

The Knight-Commander’s face twisted at the offer he had extended just earlier that year to Wynne. Mute with emotion, Greagoir’s head twitched with assent.

Wynne turned to face the warden’s party, which had now grown to include Faren and a few hundred mages.

“Now, who needs healing?”

As Wynne gently worked the edges off of everyone, a tired mage caught Carver’s attention.

Carver wiped the sweat off his brow. “Are you injured?”

The mage shook his head. “It’s not that, soldier. A number of my

classmates had fled to the basement when Uldred's followers had started summoning demons. I know not if my peers have returned, or yet still live."

Carver glanced back at Elissa and the rest, concluding that they were busy enough curbing hostilities between Templars, mages, and prospective wardens.

He sighed. "Which way?"

## Chapter End Notes

Maric's wiki page revealed one benefit of Orlesian occupation: learning poetic behaviour. The usurper King Meghren had beheaded Maric's mother and put her head on a pike at her castle's gates to display Ferelden's severed power. Guess what Maric had done to Meghren at the end of the Rebellion?

It's a wonder that with the boner that Fereldens seem to have on the topic of the Ferelden Rebellion, no one goes as often and loudly about how the war had ended, as they do about why the war had started. I know if *I* had witnessed Arya Stark avenge the Red Wedding and feed Walder Frey his own sons, I'd be speaking *up* that story.

Additionally: how I *wish* the mage origin could tell Wynne, an Aequitarian, how they became a warden. I see a lot of people paint Wynne as a textbook Circle mage, but you do have to travel for some time with Wynne before she reveals that she willingly accepted a spirit into her. In the Broken Circle quest, she's evasive on the subject with even her friend. She also approves indefinitely travelling for research (see: Shale and Tevinter), thus she believes that a mage doesn't have to be confined in a tower or supervised by Templars 24/7. I'd like to believe she doesn't support tricking mages into doing blood magic so they can be arrested, either.

Which is what Irving did in the mage origin. Along with sending a Chantry initiate to prison, "so that the affair is just as embarrassing to the Chantry as it is to the Circle."

Let me see Grandma Wynne pop off!

# Wandering One

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Circle's basement proved dim in atmosphere, even with a torch to cut through twenty feet of it. Carver's hair stood on end from the chill, and every brush of his armour on stone seemed to send echoing whispers down the basement's corridors. Sometimes, Carver thought he'd hear something faintly whisper back. The mage who had directed him downstairs was clinging to Carver's shadow, more bookish than brave, yet required for direction all the same.

They turned their third corner before Carver's nerves had enough. He whipped his torch aside, glaring at the last corner.

"Zevran."

The assassin stepped out silently, empty palms held out before they were stuffed into pockets. "I know Ferelden takes pride in dreariness, but this isn't a contest."

The mage behind Carver blinked between him and Zevran as they continued down the hallway, Carver wordlessly accepting Zevran's company. The Crow was allowed to be curious so long as he had a babysitter, else Elissa would burn their ears off.

The mage gestured. "The pantry is just beyond."

"No," Carver steered. "Where are the phylacteries stored?"

The mage bewilderingly instructed him where, and the small group worked a locked door before finally swinging the way open to the mage's frightened classmates. The students enthusiastically embraced each other, relieved that the fright was over and they could return above ground.

Carver noted nearby glass shards caught in the crevices of cobblestones.

Several rescued mages noticed his curiosity. "...We had accidentally shattered a few vials in our haste to lock ourselves in here."

Carver slipped out a dagger and handed it to Zevran. "Check the

adjacent storage room.”

Zevran tossed the blade up in a perfect circle. “Are you sure?”

Carver looked at him.

“...My pleasure!” Zevran willingly vanished into the next room.

Carver raised his head to the closest shelves crowded with all manner of bottle racks. His gaze refocused on a phylactery tray with scattered cavities, like an incomplete box of chocolates.

“You’ve committed no wrongs,” Carver commented evenly. “As you said, it was merely an accident.”

“R-Right,” the mages caught on.

The students jumped at a sudden bang behind a wall, and Carver turned to witness Zevran usher in a frazzled and significantly taller man through the adjacent room’s door. It was a wonder that with the towering staff in his hand, the mage had still lost to a small elf with a letter opener.

Carver stared.

“Anders?” a young mage identified.

The tall man was in his smallclothes and nothing else. “I was planning to swim away, this time.”

“Had Uldred not returned quickly,” Carver permitted, “you would have succeeded — for a while. Zevran, are there any more?”

Zevran chuckled, and Anders reflexively flinched in fresh fear. “No one else is foolish enough to hide among dusty mystic relics. Or think shadows effective against me.”

“Walk the mages back upstairs,” Carver sighed. “I have a small mess to clean up, then I’ll follow.”

“Oh?” Zevran prodded.

Carver hadn’t demanded his knife back, and he was watching Zevran twirl the blade as if it weighed nothing. Throughout their journey to the Circle and even now through the basement, Carver had shown Zevran his back. Having fought Zevran before, Carver couldn’t believe Zevran was harmless even when unarmed. He merely believed in



Zevran's oath.

What Carver did and didn't say expressed much.

Zevran stilled the knife in his hand, his face suddenly unreadable. "... Hm."

Carver watched the group shuffle out for the first floor before the knight turned away to copy phylactery labels down on a scrap of parchment. Carver would have to figure out a way of destroying the prospective wardens' vials at a later time when tempers weren't running hot. Carver was just starting to curse his dull nub when a whisper bounced back from the room next door, with no shift of armour to have summoned it.

*"I seeeee youuuuuuu...."*

Carver froze, heart hammering.

*"Approaaaaach...ye...."*

Carver dismounted his torch from the wall and ventured into the next storage room. Countless brass globes and crystal chandeliers enhanced his modest flames into a roomful of artificial daylight. Carver squinted against the sudden change and warily mounted his torch by the doorway. Footprints and streaks through layers of dust traced Zevran and Anders' movement through the room previously.

*"Closeeer...."*

A faceless statue of a robed woman beckoned Carver over with a hollow voice, which grew clearer as he neared the relic. He recognised the stone woman from another life.

*"You must be...Eleni Zinovia."*

*"'Tis I,"* a cultured accent confirmed. Carver halted before the statue. *"Once consort and advisor to archon Valerius, now only Eleni in spirit. Prophecy, my crime, cursed to stone for foretelling the fall of my lord's house. No help can be given to me, for this is my doom and my destiny."*

"You summoned me," Carver commented, "where a mage had broken your solitude just earlier. Unless you spoke to him as well."

*"Anders has a near future of his own whispers,"* Eleni foretold.

Justice.

Carver's lips thinned. "I know better than to question your sight."

*"Stone, they made me, and stone I am," Eleni pointed out the price of her honesty. "Eternal and unfeeling. And I shall endure 'till the Maker returns to light their fires again."*

Carver had just prepared to leave when he suffered whiplash. "The Maker exists?"

By the time Carver had walked ten years in Thedas, he had come to believe in a greater power due to his inexplicable transmigration, and had attached the label of "Maker" to the concept — the label alone, and not the Chantry's image of it. He had not, however, allowed himself to ponder too deeply about his situation. He had told himself that that way lied madness.

Now with the growing difficulties of Carver's chosen path in life came the increasingly accessible choice to finally think about himself, but Carver was allergic to self-reflection.

Eleni's voice rang. *"You who barely grasps the wisdom of the earth, now seeks the wisdom of the heavens? I thusly judge to tell you this.... What creations universally share is a reflection of their creator. We can all agree that cutting down an innocent child is evil. We can all admire unconditional love."*

*"For what reason could the world you know exist, except the reason for which any god would create life: to celebrate with a sentient species all that is good? Such joy is meaningless without awareness, thus the created are given the freedom of choice — from which evil may be born. A creator may allow evils to exist so that their creations would learn from their agency or find the inspiration and strength to seek good, and thus grow from it."*

Carver scoffed. "I know of evil people in this world programmed to be cruel and unrepentant."

Eleni was unruffled. *"You walk a thin line of pride and wisdom. Allow me this, then — if you know them as well as you say, then you know what to make of that which created them."*

Carver's blood suddenly ran cold. He had refused to seriously acknowledge Eleni's sight and the wisdom that could come with it — until that moment. Mob characters that were created to serve no purpose except to be evil were reflections of their game's developers; call it lazy writing, or the result of time constraints, but a game was

inevitably a reflection on its company. Carver's dilemma lied in *his* choice — to mentally contain Thedas's reality in a box, or to remove all aspects of "order" from the world. He wasn't living a video game, but life itself was still a game, a perpetual call for decisions that changed one's environment, and now Carver was debating if he knew the rules.

Carver could just as easily ponder the question of the ages, "is there a god?"

In a narrower perspective, he'd be asking, "are the game developers relevant here?"

He mourned. "I wish you never spoke to me, woman."

*"And so pride and wisdom retreat to ignorance,"* Eleni remarked. *"I am here if you decide to walk forward again."*

"Saving Thedas is far simpler when I don't question my existence or Thedas itself."

*"Find solace in this truth,"* Eleni allowed. *"You cherish all life in Thedas. One cannot cherish life without loving it."*

Carver pivoted. "Now I'm a loving, all-knowing idiot. Goodbye."

*"We will meet again, wandering one."*

Carver's mind raced as he fled the basement.

Seeing Eleni's situation reminded him that he — no, this *body* had breathed out its life twice. Once in the crib, again in Ostagar. *Someone else* was sustaining the body somehow, like Wynne's Spirit of Faith. Yet, someone else hadn't dreamt since entering Thedas, so they didn't have a connection to the Fade, and they were coherent in the waking world unlike Justice. They were no spirit. Indeed, they were unquestionably their own person, a soul.

Where was the real Carver, then? What had become of the original?

Carver resurfaced from the basement to the beginnings of a riot. He dodged a loose limb and grabbed the closest coherent figure.

"What the...what is the meaning of this?" Carver asked, bewildered.

A mage snarled. "The Templars are attacking!"

“Nay!” a Templar swiftly refuted, sword unsheathed but pointed away. He spotted Carver’s unmarked armour, identifying him as part of Elissa’s party. “It is a Templar knight of ours — but he reflects none save the worst of the trauma we had to face!”

Afar, a voice cracked. “*They’re blood mages! Consorts of possession!*”

“He is troubled,” the Templar pressed. “Peace, I pray you!”

Carver separated the mage and Templar from each other before violence could erupt. “Away your weapons. Warden Alistair!” he barked.

“I’ve got it!” the former Templar answered, already shoving his way to the loudest of voices. “Be still, knight!”

“*We can’t trust any of them!*”

Greagoir arrived. “Knight-Templar Cullen, stand down!”

The commander’s voice split the air like lightning, stunning the mob. Cullen shoved off the restraining grips of his fellow Templars, who had been holding him back from the nearest mage with a staff.

Cullen straightened, nerves frayed. “I’ve seen what they can do, ser, and we can’t know how many have in turn been affected. It follows to reason that we must kill them all!”

“Stay your tongue,” Greagior thundered.

Cullen withered. “Knight-Commander?”

Greagior exhaled, ageing a decade in an instant. He placed a hand on Cullen’s shoulder. “The crisis is ended, Cullen. You require rest and recuperation. Have you respect for me, you will see to *your* duties and trust me with the rest.”

Cullen’s face crumpled with exhaustion and sorrow. He was the only survivor of the brief yet vivid horrors Uldred had brought upon the isolated corners of Kinloch Hold. The blood mage and his followers had been planning a revolution long before Ostagar, and had had the materials to hit the ground running upon their return. It was just another oversight to Irving’s brilliant plan of leaving forbidden tomes lying around to catch heretics.

Alistair backed off and caught Carver’s eye. If the party left any later,

they risked participating in a riot.

X

Elissa's party headed the migration of a hundred mages from the tower, with the addition of Faren. The dwarven warden's presence allayed mages' lingering fears that Elissa's party would heel-turn and throw the mages back into the Circle. With a party this massive and Duncan's orders to form an *army*, Elissa decided to escort the mage recruits to Highever, where Faren as a warden could oversee the new army's organisation in Cousland territory while Elissa and Alistair continued their mission.

A late-night encounter with a lost Levi Dryden provided an alternate solution. The honest merchant had claim to Soldier's Peak to the northwest of Amaranthine and far east of Highever. The mountain fortress was abandoned now, its blueprints lost to mould with only Levi's memory to give direction through a multi-level stone maze. However, aside from noble gossip against the Dryden line and rumours of spirits haunting the fortress, Soldier's Peak offered an assembly point for the Grey Wardens and their allies. With a recent experience in fighting off demons, the mage recruits essentially promised a smooth reclamation of Soldier's Peak from any unnatural guests. It went without saying that the Wardens' district in Denerim would no longer be able to support their expanded size.

Decided, the warden's party switched routes and cut through the Bannorn for Soldier's Peak, tracing the shortest path for the sake of the elderly and the young among them. Upon arrival at the Peak's weathered base, the party split up into dozens of mobile units to clear out the fortress from top to bottom.

Carver found himself in a small group comprised of Leliana, a couple mages, Morrigan in raven-form following them, and *Anders*.

The blonde mage slipped away for an exit any chance he got.

Carver snatched Anders' elbow for the final time. "Another party will mistake you for an enemy," Carver warned.

Anders plucked Carver's hand off. "If you had a handsome face, failing to run away would at least be rewarding."

"This keep is crawling with undead," Leliana pointed out, bow and arrow alert. "Better we stick within each others' sights. I'm not chasing him, Carver."

Carver groaned at Anders' opportunistically fleeing back. "Why do I have to believe in balanced parties?"

An arrow pinned Anders' sleeve to a wall, earning Leliana a distant yelp. She hummed. "So we may cover long and short-range?"

"Shield him, please," Carver gestured to Anders, and the mages with them cast shields on the distant blonde just as undead burst through a door down the hall.

"Enemies!" Carver called out, and charged at the closest skeleton.

Between ancient magic traps, twisting hallways, and Levi's word on the fortress's layout, Soldier's Peak truly challenged one's sense of direction. The frustration was so great, Carver knew in turn that once conquered, Soldier's Peak would be the Wardens' most reliable base along the Waking Sea. Levi's laissez-faire family would also manage the land fairly and be rescued from obsolescence with finally having tenants, without micromanaging them. The patient Levi's temper ran coolly, the most compatible Carver could ask for in the Grey Wardens' future landlord.

Eventually, Carver and his group agreed on turning right at every corner to regain a sense of direction, which led to them climbing a tower's spiral stairs. Anders groaned at the irony.

"You know it's hard to use magic around you?" Anders complained to Carver. "I have to put more effort in drawing on the Fade and squeezing out a spell. You're not even smiting."

Carver glanced back at Anders, who in the tight staircase was stuck with Carver in front and Leliana behind while the more obedient mages followed. Carver shrugged. "I wasn't aware of passive Templar abilities."

"There are none," Anders corrected. "You just suck the ease out of magic -- like a bootlegged smite."

"Really? *Bootlegged?*"

Leliana chirped up curiously. "Are you trained in Templar ways?"

Carver shook his head. "I wanted to become a Templar when I was younger, but circumstances led me to join the king's army instead."

"I knew it," Anders drawled. "You despise mages."

“Not at all.”

“Oh?” Anders’ voice lilted. “You don’t hate mages, but you admire a system that corrals and abuses them? That’s the hypocritical mindset I expect of a Templar.”

Carver defended, “I can condemn the violation of basic human rights, and still respect the inherent purpose of the Templar Order.”

“Because ‘magic exists to serve man, and never rule over him?’” Anders recited.

“When one quotes Andraste,” Carver commented, “one must keep context in mind.”

“And here I thought we had to take every word of Andraste’s seriously,” Anders returned.

Carver inwardly sighed. How did one introduce the history of mental health treatment? “Leliana?” he checked.

The rogue sent her assent up the stairs. It was Anders’ and the other mages’ misfortune to be stuck with two nerds who didn’t mind filling mindless hours with book chatter.

Carver took a deep breath. “You forget that the Templar Order originated from the Seekers of Truth, who had subscribed to Andrastian beliefs but predated the Chantry. Practitioners of magic originally received coaching from the Seekers for their personal problems, protected by a promise of confidentiality, and with this support were capable of recognising the hollowness of demonic temptation. ‘Magic’ couldn’t ‘rule over’ them. However, as Old God cultism was still rampant in those times, so was the acceptance of blood sacrifices and demonic possession, detracting the effectiveness of coaching.

“Between that and the First Blight, the Seekers felt compelled to raise arms against perceived threats to honest mages. Their impartial justice and crossing with too many powerful groups eventually earned them the pejorative moniker of the ‘Inquisition,’ and when the Chantry formed, the Chantry persuaded the Seekers to lay down their arms and settle into an organised order. The Seekers thus signed the Nevarran Accord, placing themselves under the Chantry’s leadership and splitting their senior and junior members into the Seekers and Templars respectively. Meanwhile, the Chantry created the Circle of Magi for Andrastian mages to receive Seeker guidance.”

Anders scoffed. “What, then? The Chantry is to blame for everything?”

“The Chantry today should take responsibility for its failings,” Carver decided, “but it can’t carry an entire history’s worth of blame. After all, the Seekers of past wouldn’t have signed the Nevarran Accord unthinkingly, and that is reflected in the Templar Order’s sigil.”

Leliana murmured, “Hessarian’s flaming sword.”

“The blade of regret and mercy,” Carver confirmed. “When Hessarian blamed himself for Andraste’s suffering, he drove his sword through her heart to free her of her pain. Similarly, when a Templar — a junior Seeker — fails to counsel a mage through their emotional problems and loses the mage to a demon, it is a Templar’s bitter duty to cut the demon down.”

All was silent behind Carver for a dozen steps.

Anders’ usually teasing voice fell flat. “...The Circle doesn’t teach that.”

“Nor the Templar Order, apparently,” Carver said. “It is unfortunate that they do not teach their own history, or practice what they once preached.”

From what Carver knew from his past life and what he had read in the present one, he also hypothesised that Tranquility had originally been no more than part of the process of becoming a Seeker. After all, who better to counsel a mage than a former mage? Unfortunately, as could be done with any invention, someone must have found a way to use Tranquility outside of its intended purpose, and now it was an accessible tool of abuse for Templars.

Leliana spoke up. “You have read much on Templars, Carver, and taken away an unexpected point from it.” She hummed. “What drove you as a child towards the Templars? No one seeks the Order for shallow reasons, unless they are familial ones.”

Carver spluttered. “I hail from *modest* origins.”

Leliana chuckled. “Your confidence belongs in court.”

“Or the military!”

“At higher ranks,” Leliana allowed. “I *have* seen the pommel of your sword, Carver.”



Carver inwardly panicked. “The sword was a gift. And perhaps I’m merely confident by nature.”

Leliana’s voice sweetened. “Forgive me for thinking you’re lying.”

“Half-confident, then.” Carver exhaled, compromising. “...My father named me after the Templar who helped him escape the Circle. Not all Templars have forgotten the spirit of the original Order.” When Leliana inhaled to speak, Carver returned, “You must forgive my curiosity, in turn, on whether your knowledge, keen eye, and archery skills source from your background as a Sister or as a bard.”

Leliana deflected. “How did a boy seeking the Order end up in the king’s army?”

“Money.”

The entire party nearly tripped at his deadpan.

A mage at the back found their voice. “Seriously? You’re not...”

“The fifth son of a noble?” Carver snorted. “I grew up on a farm.”

“Where is your father now?” another mage asked.

Carver sighed. “With his father.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“It has been many years, but thank you.”

“*Borf!*”

“What in Maker’s name--!?”

The group summited the tower’s stairs only for Dog to ram into Carver with affection, nearly bowling him over back into Anders and Leliana. Numerous sets of eyes blinked at each other with bewilderment, starting with Levi, Elissa, Faren, and a couple of other mages. The raven-shaped Morrigan flapped her wings and imperiously reclaimed Dog as her mount.

Levi’s group had apparently encountered the possessed corpse of Levi’s many times’ great-grandmother, who had shed light on the sins that had led to the downfall of Soldier’s Peak. The demon had authenticated her possession of Sophia Dryden’s memories to Levi and punctuated with an offer to seal a Fade rift within the keep, in

exchange for having the group kill a warden mage named Avernus who was hiding in the keep's tower. Unable to agree, Elissa's party had slain the demon and hastened to chase after the other demons that the fake Sophia had summoned.

Faren had managed to down a rage demon with thrown daggers before the party had turned a sharp corner and stumbled upon Carver's party. The other demons were nowhere in sight, but a mage in Elissa's party reasoned that the demons had likely run off for Avernus's last known location in the tower.

*"How old is this warden mage?"* Leliana panted as both parties raced for the tower's heart.

Faren guffawed. "Storm age, I reckon!"

"People aren't wine bottles!" Carver spluttered.

Anders groaned. "Another crazy blood mage! Fantastic!"

Sadly, no matter his phrasing, Anders was usually right. Avernus was apparently not just a warden who was using blood magic to delay his body's decay, but was also an avid researcher of blood magic on any corpse he could grab. Even freshly-made corpses. King Arland's deliberate censorship of Soldier's Peak from public record was presently preventing merchants from accidentally wandering into the keep and being killed. Avernus had finally grown desperate enough to attract Levi through dreams.

The party finally managed to corner Avernus into a weaponless state, no nearby bloody corpses or lyrium left to allow the staff in his hands to be more than a blunt stick.

Faren pointed a dagger up at the mage's navel. "This is where you die!"

"Don't kill him," Carver interceded.

A dozen heads turned his direction, even Avernus staring ahead in bewilderment.

"What!?" Anders gaped. "He's a blood mage who experiments on human bodies! You know what we call those kinds of mages? Tevinter!"

Leliana pursed her lips. "After all you've said, Carver, why would you

want to keep this criminal alive?”

Carver solemnly stepped towards Avernus, the pointed weapons around him shifting to place him out of their sights. “Death is too kind a sentence. This man knows he has been no better than Sophia Dryden.”

Avernus staggered back as if struck. “That’s not true! Sophia...the Commander *ordered* me...!”

“Sophia sent the Wardens to their deaths.” Carver advanced another step towards the shaken mage. “Sophia commanded *you* with the fortress’s security, Avernus. You were the next highest ranking officer in command, and had the right to deem Sophia unfit for duty. Avernus is a Tevinter name, right? You grasp the solemnity of drinking from the same bloody cup as those who commit to the Joining. Instead, you have furthered Sophia’s destruction in Soldier’s Peak upon wardens and common folk that threatens their great-great grandchildren even now.”

Avernus looked past Carver and saw the wardens and mages staring back at him. His gaze slowly scanned each face until he stopped on the innocent Levi Dryden.

Avernus slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. “Sophia....”

“Make this right,” Carver urged, gesturing to the keep. “For decades have you served yourself. Now, it is time to serve others.”

Carver subtly fixed his grip on his lowered sword. Avernus had the rare, centuries’-long experience of blood magic that could allow him to seal a Fade rift. Carver could name only one other figure in the entirety of Thedas with similar ability, and they were currently in uthenera without access to their orb of power. Carver was willing to give a chance to a criminal who had repented in another timeline.

Such mercy only extended as far as Carver could use them.

Avernus’s staff clattered on the ground. Everyone released the breath they were holding.

“Allow me to serve,” Avernus surrendered.

## Chapter End Notes

A lot of this was my own theories regarding Seekers and the Rite

of Tranquility. History's opinion of the Seekers was purposefully vague in DAI, ranging from "trustworthy and impartial" to "violently biased," but it was always strange to me that an order supposedly infamous for hunting mages would rely its membership on the reversal of Tranquility. Even in the possibility that the original Seekers were a mix of today's Seekers and Templars (people who could have been mages but were made Tranquil then touched by a demon, and people who weren't connected to the Fade from the start) then the original Seekers had to have been non-mages and former mages working together. This would explain the Templar method of phylacteries, and other seemingly hypocritical details of the Circle system.

It was food for thought that developed into a part of this chapter. Oops.

Edit: HESSARIAN not Maferath, smh

## It

Soldier's Peak burst into a hive of activity. Everyone suddenly had to wear many different hats to transform the once-haunted keep into a Grey Warden depot, and not a few tempers flared. One's expectation of joining the Wardens rarely included kneeling on stone tiles and scrubbing off grime with a horse hair brush. Such duties differed from a strict, studious life with food and a readied living space provided for. Critical or longing eyes strayed after Elissa and her party, who passed the same back-breaking hours quietly scribbling on paper and chatting with visitors. The warden's party couldn't relieve others of their burdens due to their ongoing mission of fulfilling ancient treaties and hunting down the archdemon, but intellectual knowledge couldn't curb innocent envy. Elissa and Carver also had much to detail to their contacts along the North Road.

The Drydens were invited back into their ancestral land as revived nobles, and with them streamed in Fereldens who sought relief from crowded southern lands and safety in the Wardens' shadow. Elissa summoned her noble training to expeditiously delegate to Levi for front-facing interactions, Alistair for Warden-specific requests, and Leliana for relocation of the local Chantry before foot traffic could bloat the Peak's main paths. The young Cousland also relayed to her brother in the west of Rendon Howe's contracted assassination against her, warning Teyrn Fergus of likewise danger towards him and his family. Carver wasn't looking forward to Fergus's response.

Not that the warden's party would remain in Soldier's Peak to receive it. A letter to Rhiannon designated Bodahn Feddic as the merchant to pass letters through while the party was on the road. Meanwhile, Carver requested an update on Denerim's alienage, particularly the security of an elven child by the name of Amethyne. He had learned on the road through the Bannorn that while Bann Loren and his family had returned to Caer Oswin safely, they had suffered one loss in Lady Landra's lady-in-waiting. In another timeline, the servant's daughter had floated to Denerim's alienage to be adopted by her mother's home community. However, catching sight of the servant lady in Castle Cousland and meeting Arl Urien in person stirred a suspicion in Carver regarding Amethyne's father.

Especially considering Lord Vaughan's inclinations.

Undoubtedly, Bann Loren and his family would passionately oppose

arguments against their claim of the girl. However, Carver and all of Denerim knew that Arl Urien was in dire need of a passable heir, and Vaughan had set the bar low enough for a little elven girl to jump over.

Carver wasn't looking forward to Rhiannon's response, either.

To close his letter, Carver ordered the relocation of Brother Weylon from Denerim to Soldier's Peak. The Chantry apprentice served Brother Genitivi as his assistant in all things written, including the security of Genitivi's personal journal and thus life's work. Weylon knew not how to decipher Genitivi's scattered writings, only how to release the complex lock that bound them, and to guard the journal with his life. After all, what could the scholarly Genitivi pursue except the Urn of Sacred Ashes, a priceless figment of history which offered no obvious military value to justify Carver's command?

...Poor Rhiannon.

Truthfully, the location of Haven interested Carver more than a cup of ashes. Still, Carver shamelessly redirected attention to Nails. If Rhiannon wanted direct orders on how to run the royal legion, she could send runners to Ser Nigel down in Ostagar. Anything else — in other words, for Carver — could be sent through Bodahn.

When all paper was finally written and sent, Elissa's party enthusiastically departed Soldier's Keep for less deskwork and more footwork. Exposure to nobility pushed the unused Guerrin legion to the forefront of Elissa's mind, deciding the party's direction for Redcliffe. The journey was long, and as they neared south, they were increasingly intercepted by darkspawn and wild wolves drawn to their leftovers. Elissa whipped a gaze at Zevran when he first displayed his knife work in battle, only for the Crow to innocently point at Carver.

Snitch.

The many opportunities of battle to trust one another with their lives wore away at everyone's paranoia around the assassin. Zevran's forward personality additionally worked like sandpaper, unwelcome yet smoothening. Definitely unexpected.

"If you have never wooed anyone, how have you met your physical needs?"

Groans rose from the road as Alistair reddened. "This again?"

Zevran prodded. “You have been a young man before, my friend, and the *appetite* of young men is—”

“I was training to be a *Templar*,” Alistair steered. “I didn’t have much opportunity.”

“Through your teenage years?” Zevran teased. “Surrounded by initiates the same age as you? Doubtful. Every man can recall the years when his libido was so unquenchable, even working his cock to the point of pain wouldn’t have been enough to tide the hunger.”

Elissa moaned. “I heard enough of this from my brother.”

Wynne hummed. “Young men do have so much energy.”

“You see?” Zevran gestured across the party. “And you are handsome, Alistair. It is difficult to believe you have only satisfied yourself alone up to now.”

Alistair spluttered. “I’m sorry, I’m still stuck on what Wynne’s comment implies.”

Wynne rose her brow archly from behind. “I was young too, once.”

“Is my virginity so hard to believe?” Alistair bemoaned.

“Of course.” Zevran nodded. “Even the quiet Carver here has a sexual appetite, yes?”

“Had.”

A chuckle greeted Carver’s curtness. “A man’s libido observes valleys, my friend, not cliffs.”

Carver threw his voice ahead. “Zevran speaks true, Alistair. You might as well reconsider your answer.”

Alistair didn’t hesitate to return Carver’s tone. “Hypocrite.”

“You are deflecting,” Zevran agreed.

“I didn’t hear a question,” Carver evaded.

“We have talked at length about myself,” Alistair eagerly determined. “I believe it’s Carver’s turn.”

“I had a sexual appetite,” Carver admitted, “and then I didn’t. Simple.”

“You’re still a young man.” Zevran’s curiosity pounced.

Carver sighed. “Can people not lay with others without giving their heart away, and give their heart to others without laying with them? For me, desires of the body are as easily avoidable as those of the heart.” As in, *not*.

Zevran, however, was subdued. “I see,” he commented. Carver’s roundabout comparison to Zevran’s secret past had still deeply struck him.

Alistair’s focus was piqued. “I’ve heard of such, but you said you *used* to be sexually attracted to others. How could you just — switch it off?”

Carver inwardly cringed. He couldn’t lie to these people, but he couldn’t tell them the truth, either. “By having no choice,” he settled.

When someone else had arrived in Thedas, they hadn’t been able to bear looking at themselves. Their intense, womanly desire for men was difficult with the fact that their vessel was a literal boy. Someone else had had to snuff out their attractions. *Quickly*. It had been one of many levels of *wrongness* in their situation that they had had to simply accept as the new normal.

They were severely repressed.

Their messed up situation had helped shape them into the emotionally constipated peanut that they were today.

“Messed up,” Bodahn echoed at the tail end of the party.

Carver nodded, then whiplashed. “What—”

The party drew their weapons as the dangling feet of villagers passed overhead. Bodahn and Sandal slowed down into a shrinking shadow upon their cart, its rickety wheels eventually reduced to a whisper. Carver gaped at villager corpses hanging from tree branches above the party, paired with a string of corpses on the dirt road leading uphill to a little town. Children and mabari lied amongst the dead.

Alistair stumbled aside to retch.

Leliana fared no better. “The darkspawn were...*playing*.”

The violated town reflected a twisted, impulsive mind far removed



from the conduct of the army in Ostagar. Carver had to wonder if darkspawn were already beginning to splinter based on their sanity level due to the sudden influx of new darkspawn underground. At least true self-awareness was still out of reach. The Architect and the dwarf Warden Utha couldn't have made significant headway on their blood experiments yet....

Duncan.

For the Architect to eventually awaken and conflict with the Mother, he had to have at least one living Warden until then, and Ostagar's heaviest clash hadn't been as hopeless as it could have been. If Duncan, who had been in the worst of the fighting, could have survived, then not all Wardens must have perished aboveground before the darkspawn could have taken them.

Carver suddenly felt as sick as when he had thought of broodmothers. He didn't wish to imagine more living survivors trapped in an underground hell. If Utha was able to complete her experiments in one year using just her own blood, what more could she accomplish using her brethren's blood as well? Even with less overall deaths and abductions from the battle in Ostagar, it was impossible to consider the entire situation as an improvement.

Still, that way lied madness. Carver's thoughts could spiral, or he could move his body and act.

Elissa crested the village's hill and sheathed her sword. "Bodahn," she called back, "reverse your cart. No trade or goods will be found here."

Bodahn pulled up beside the party, undeterred. "I once scavenged the Deep Roads, Warden. No scene of death can upset me more than a missed opportunity. I am afraid simply by the threat of death."

Sandal pointed from the driver's box. "Enchantment!"

Indeed, the frozen rage of a golem was captured past the hill; blood, birdseed, and bird droppings altered the finer features of the stone statue, concealing an etched, human fury. Drawing closer to the motionless golem revealed its awful realness. Alistair himself flinched in sight of it.

Bodahn dismissed Sandal to begin picking at dropped possessions around the village while the merchant searched his own goods.

"Aha!" Bodahn produced a stone wand patterned with runes. "I

relieved an unlucky merchant of this relic. He couldn't fetch a half-decent price on a 'counterfeit golem artefact,' so I offered a quarter-decent price. Never told him Sandal had a gift of perceiving authentic runes."

"Is that what I think it is?" Carver ran a hand down his face at the rune pattern.

"Dulen kar?" Bodahn turned to him, surprised.

"No," Carver shook his head, reaching for a memory. "Not the 'rod' of control, but the 'spell.' Dulen...harn."

A tremor split through the village. The party braced themselves with bewilderment as light raced up the frozen golem's body and pooled into its eyes. In sudden movements like a low frame-rate scene, the golem broke free of its wrathful posture and regained its balance with wide, heavy swings of its limbs. Its stone head swivelled in place to point laser eyes at the party.

"Uh, Carver?" Elissa squeaked.

"What's the spell for 'spare me' in dwarven?" Alistair panicked.

"I know no such vocabulary," Sten helpfully stated.

"Veata!" Zevran declared. "Safe word!"

"I'm too old for this," Wynne muttered.

The golem jabbed a finger at Bodahn. "Speak a command."

Half a dozen heads turned his direction. The merchant blinked innocently. "I right believe I'm the first dwarf to dream, to tell a golem to calm down!"

"Dreams usually flow fairer," Leliana reflexively provided.

The golem straightened up with a realisation, and everyone jumped when it loosed a hardy laugh.

"Ha! I bear no compulsion to obey!" It loomed over the party. "Centuries of darkness, then slavery, abruptly broken by ignorance. Now I have no desired direction, save a present curiosity. Speak its name."

Carver watched the party share lost looks before he grudgingly

gestured to the side. “Bodahn Feddic, and his son Sandal.”

“The squishy creature knows its place.” The golem nodded in contentment. “Well! What directs its path? I seek a diversion.”

Sten caught on first. “The tool finds us beneath proper address. I am not surprised. Errors abound where a creature lacks purpose.”

Elissa looked at Sten. “Are you referring to us chaotic Fereldens, or the sentient golem...?”

“The Blight!” Alistair piped up, ever the warden. “Our motivation for even *straying through here* is to stop the archdemon and its darkspawn.”

“Oh?” the golem hummed. “I have nothing else to do, except crush pigeons.”

Had Alistair just invited a psychopathic golem on a formal mission of national importance? Why yes, of course he had.

Carver only had himself to blame. His vague memories of certain downloadable content had triggered an internal compulsion to find answers. Now he had more dominoes to balance, although truthfully, the golem was merely one more troublesome immortal. To be fair from an outsider’s point of view, Carver had set a precedent by endorsing an assassin.

Whose instinct in a golem’s path was to shout a dwarven sex word.

The rod in Bodahn’s hand truly held less power than a candlestick.

As the hidden yet still official supervisor of their party, Carver reluctantly stepped up. “...How shall we address you, then?”

The golem’s laser eyes twinkled. “Hmm...‘Shale’ only feels right. Call me Shale.”

X

The party’s journey from Soldier’s Peak to Redcliffe had burned through too much time.

They arrived at Redcliffe at night.

“Darkspawn!” Alistair cried out, equipping his sword and shield.

Carver cut through the noise. “No — undead!”

A wave of shambling corpses saw the party at the city gates, breaking into a sprint for their blood. Panic flared through the party as metal and magic hastily met a mindless horde. Unlike the armoured skeletons of Soldier’s Peak, the party’s foes were fleshy and dressed in recently torn clothes or scratched armour, as if they had been in the midst of mundane, everyday tasks before suddenly up and attacking everything. The undead were also asymmetrical in figure, from a caved-in head to a leg twisted the wrong way. They all had broken skin. Some of them even had the flesh torn from their lower mouths to expose a permanent smile.

Yet none of this deterred them from clawing at the party and haphazardly jabbing swords and spears at the closest opening. They didn’t even register cutting one of their own down in the process.

Finally, Alistair and Shale bashed the undead in the incline of their momentum, toppling back a tight radius around the party. The field of undead around the party instantly burst in roaring flames. Just as unnaturally, the flames sputtered out in a sharp exhale.

Wynne lowered her staff. If clouds weren’t blocking the moon, Carver suspected even Denerim would be able to see the mage beaded with sweat. When the party blinked through the darkness, they discovered that they had hacked their way through literally half of Redcliffe, blearily arriving at the city’s Chantry. Wynne’s flash of fire had briefly captured formless figures across the Chantry square, giving locations to the noises of battle around them. In the distance, Sandal was loosing explosive runes at undead around the Feddic family’s cart.

“Who goes there!?” a faceless voice barked in the clamour of crossed swords.

“The Grey Wardens!” Elissa shouted back, rejoining the fray. “We seek the Guerrin legion!”

A sharp scoff answered her. “Well, you’re bloody fighting them!”

The party had rested only once since leaving Soldier’s Peak, and they were exhausted. The warriors and rogues had lost their unequipped helmets in the mayhem, and Alistair had barely been able to loop his arm through his shield. Carver stumbled his way through packed alleys and elbowed whichever body screeched at him. Any sword in his direction was clumsily answered with his own. Only Sten’s growling from behind eased the itch on Carver’s back.

An undead suddenly rammed Carver off-balance, crashing through him, a wooden door, and a foreign body that wasn't Sten. The stranger wildly struggled from under Carver, who lost grip of his sword to grab his dive knife and sink it into the undead pinning his torso down. A viscous warmth spurted against Carver's bare face as he stabbed again, then twisted his knife with finality. The undead bodily flinched and fell limp.

*"Stand on sand and take a deep breath through a short shaft, you nug-humping—!"*

The expletives would have flowed on, had Carver not finally rolled the undead off of him and picked himself up from the ground. A dwarf scurried to his feet from under Carver and grabbed a rune-carved axe dimly glowing over his shoulder.

Carver's sword tip found the dwarf's neck faster.

"Easy there," the dwarf shakily exhaled, releasing the axe strapped to his back. "I'm no undead. We're on the same side, see?"

"No?" Carver's voice quirked. "Then why the bolted door?"

Carver and the dwarf were still shedding remains of the wooden door. The dwarf straightened, his temper sharper than the blade at his throat.

"A qunari sword," Carver cut off before the dwarf could speak. "Do you have one?"

The dwarf's neck flushed redder than the glow of his fire runes. "You've lost the right to trade, human!"

"That is a yes, then."

It wasn't Carver who had spoken. Sten stepped past the doorway from behind Carver, blocking even starlight.

Torment and awe stole the dwarf's throat, before a pudgy finger grudgingly pointed to a corner of the room. Carver grabbed the dwarf's collar and shoved the cowardly merchant into the corner where his glowing axe shed light on a sealed crate.

Sten stomped on the crate, once. It shattered.

"Asala..." Sten reverently picked up a glint of steel in the dim light, as

long and thin as a clothesline. Sten turned it like it was weightless, revealing a wide greatsword. “Are you sure you are a soldier? You must be an ashkaari, to find one specific sword in the midst of a blight.”

Carver pushed the merchant in front of him to help face off the undead. Sten’s unexpected reunion with his sword was ill-timed.

“I know what losing a sword means to the Qunari,” Carver instead offered. “To not be caught even *dead* without a sword in hand.... Your people are a fighting people.” Like the originators of martial arts, transforming farming tools into weapons. Anything to defend one’s beliefs.

Still — Carver mused as he threw himself and the dwarf merchant at undead — confirming Asala’s location had taken no small effort. Carver had been forced to hound the homeless around Lake Calenhad for clues towards the sword, earning him odd glances from the warden’s party when they’d catch him bargaining with a hobo on the street. Carver had been graciously spared from a wild goose chase to Orzammar by at last confirming a certain merchant’s name. The scrap of fact was enough for Carver to deduce that should he find the merchant’s opportunist contact in Redcliffe, he’d find a qunari sword.

Luck explained why the only qunari sword to float around Ferelden belonged to the qunari travelling with Carver.

A smothered sense of smell and a long, *long* patience explained why Carver had been able to *find* it.

At that point, the monetary fortune that was qunari-crafted steel paled in comparison to the peace that came with returning it to its owner.

The mob around Carver surged, and the heavy doors of the Chantry suddenly closed around him and his allies seemingly out of nowhere. In the candlelight of Redcliffe’s refuge, the party was still hesitant to catch their breath, as if undead would sprout from the ground like darkspawn did. The oak doors pounded with a hundred fists from outside, matched by a hundred faithful praying indoors.

Carver panted as he squinted through the frail light for the closest Redcliffe soldier. He found and snatched the city mayor instead.

“Why have we stopped fighting?” Carver demanded.

Mayor Murdock shook off Carver’s grip. “We have lost too many men

and women. We must consider the battle that also awaits us tomorrow night. Rest.” Murdock pointed to the densest cluster of candles, where a Chantry mother was nursing candelabras. “Dawn breaks in four hours. The doors will hold until then.”

Sten curtly murmured dissatisfaction at the mayor’s decision, but a glance through the crowd confirmed that the warden’s party was dead on their feet. Bodahn and Sandal were handing out the party’s bedrolls that they kept in the cart as part of their protection agreement. Carver exhaled deeply and clunked over to an alcove where he could almost ignore the racket of pounding doors. He didn’t remember closing his eyes.

The sun rose over a deserted city.

Murdock, able-bodied men and women, and the warden’s party stepped out of the Chantry and gathered what would be useful for the next clash, discarding what wouldn’t. Elissa and a number of local fighters borrowed Bodahn’s cart to move the dead to a ditch to be burned. The boats were dry-docked, and no arrows could be spared for a proper funeral. The Chantry mother placated woes with a reminder that Andraste had passed away as ashes.

“Karashok.”

Sten surprised Carver at the docks. The qunari called party members by their position in the eyes of the Qun, with Carver identified as a foot soldier. It seemed Sten followed such reasoning now, even where Murdock’s people shuffled around them. Perhaps the local fighters could not be considered soldiers by the Qun’s definition.

Carver looked up from where he was untangling a dead body from a net.

“You voiced an awareness of the Qunari way,” Sten continued. “I had only mentioned it in passing once. Yet it has not escaped me that you had been seeking my sword since then.”

Carver dropped the untangled net and stood up, gesturing for Sten to follow as he found his next task. “I’m from Lothering.”

Sten stared at the non sequitur.

Carver pressed his lips together. “I heard of you in Lothering’s tavern. The farmer family you had killed...I had grown up with their children. You regret it.”

"I do."

"Because your body is your tool," Carver replied. "No one but you is responsible for what it does, or what happens to it. That is why you let Lothering's legion arrest you and deny you food and drink. The same logic explains why you cared little for dangers that found you since joining Warden Elissa on her quest."

Sten didn't deny it. "Had I somehow managed to cross Ferelden and Tevinter unarmed and alone to report the blight to the Arishok, the Antaam would have slain me on sight. My life had been forfeit since carelessly losing my sword."

"I spoke to the homeless in Lake Calenhad," Carver corrected. "They spoke of darkspawn sprouting from the earth, from one's own shadow, and coursing through all civilisation. They spoke of two qunari corpses, two swords damaged from resisting a hurlock emissary, and one sword lodged in an ogre's chest."

Sten said nothing.

Carver pointed at Sten, then his sword. "Do not cheapen this tool in the loss of the other. Both are yours, and precious. You must understand *half* of what I'm saying, else you wouldn't have named your sword 'Asala.'"

Soul.

Sten's gaze unfocused, then returned to Carver. "The body is merely a vessel, and a sword is one's extension. However, I will...consider your words, Karashok. ...Are those oil barrels?"

As the two of them coordinated with Murdock's people on moving oil barrels, Carver internally sighed. Elissa had recruited Sten at the height of his depression, and Sten had only recently reunited with his desire to live. It would be difficult, but Carver was going to maintain an eye on Sten for a little longer just in case. He was already conscious of Zevran's movements, since the assassin had originally ambushed Elissa with the intent to *die*. Carver didn't want to lose his allies to purposeful carelessness, curse his bleeding heart.

He was cognisant of his own messed up psyche. For that reason, he knew he couldn't offer to counsel Sten or Zevran.

Passing by the dwarven merchant's safehouse, Carver's oil barrel rolled away from his frozen hands. The undead he had stabbed twice



was lying in an impressive splatter of blood, and a near identical undead was splayed motionless behind it outside the building. Carver gravely reached for the latter to turn its face up to the sunlight.

“Foggy,” Carver breathed. “Badger.”

Sten halted his barrel. “Karasaad,” he identified. Higher ranked soldiers. The two corpses were sporting the marks of Maric’s Shield in their armour and weapons.

Carver tugged on Foggy’s sword, which refused to budge in the old man’s grip. It could have been rigor mortis, or a relic of the man’s transcending willpower. Carver quietly cursed. “I had sent scouts to Redcliffe prior to arriving at Ostagar, yet they had returned with no noteworthy news. They should have heard otherwise from Foggy and Badger.”

A passing local fighter consoled Carver. “The undead fell upon us in a blink, soldier. Them scouts mayhaps ‘a been lucky to fly before dusk.”

Carver tugged Foggy’s helmet off to replace the one Carver had lost. The greaves would demand more effort. “If those who die to the undead end up joining them, who were the first undead?”

The fighter sighed. “Guerrin legion, it was, up from Redcliffe Castle. First night, they leaked out into the city like a bleeding wound, killing and taking their kills. The terrors have been growing every night since then. I don’ wanna imagine the state of Redcliffe Castle.”

Carver swapped his gauntlets with Foggy’s. “Is the entire Guerrin Legion lost?”

The fighter puffed his chest up. “So long as there are hearts ‘mong us raring to fight for the arl, the legion ain’t lost.”

Carver knew the feeling.

Carver rose, returning to his barrel and rolling it along with the others. There had been no servants among the first undead, just soldiers. If Connor had resorted to connecting with a demon to help his father, the demon likely saw the pragmatism of retaining sane servants to maintain the castle and its comforts, while taking over the arl’s soldiers to control military power. By intention or not, the demon had set up an inevitability where the undead army would compose the entirety of Redcliffe beyond the castle. More, if the undead could infect nearby settlements and retreat to windowless rooms within the

hours of night.

It was clear that gossip and inference alone weren't enough. Carver and the party needed to find out what was happening in Redcliffe Castle themselves — by breaking into the infamously airtight fortress.

# First Soldier

Ser Perth and four other knights of Redcliffe had been dragged by their armpits to the inner walls of the Chantry by the time everyone had realised how the undead army increased its numbers. Confused and injured, the knights had fought off the undead in the first night, nearly fallen in the second, and been grounded by Mother Hannah in the third despite their protestations. Now, upon Carver's invitation, they were raring to rescue the arl and his family.

"It's but a knee," Perth defended when Carver's eyes moved down. "We are the five of us knighted. I can draw a bow just as well as the others."

Carver didn't react. "Help him up."

Two Redcliffe knights picked Perth up until he could stand on his good leg and lean on his fellow knight for the other. The bandages around his left knee were dark, but not dripping. Unprompted, another knight geared Perth up with a hip quiver and a shortbow, then all five knights turned to face Carver with lifted chins.

"Hurry and wait at the windmill," Carver directed. "Once the warden's party opens the way, follow us in. You're responsible for watching our backs."

Relieved at not being stopped, Perth and the injured knights saluted and began their slow climb for the local windmill. Alistair spotted the event and caught Carver as the dark-haired boy passed the knights uphill.

"Nice helmet and gauntlets," Alistair heatedly whispered, "but that doesn't make you a soldier in Maric's Shield. You know I can't let you act irresponsibly, Carver. What are you *thinking*?"

"Warden Alistair," Carver nodded without slowing down. "Just who I'm looking for. Do you recall the embossed pattern of Bann Teagan's signet ring?"

"What?" Alistair spluttered.

"It would have been a golden ring on his left pinky."

"I know what a signet ring is!" Alistair confirmed. "What do you want

with his fancy initials anyway?”

It wasn't Chantry or Ferelden tradition to maintain middle names, so Teagan must have been sealing documents with a wax "TG" before Connor's demon had halted all correspondence from Redcliffe Castle.

"If you're done helping the townspeople," Carver noted, "that means Elissa and the others are, too. The secret passage into Redcliffe Castle will be easier to find with more eyes now."

"*Secret passage!?*"

Leliana and Sten were setting up oil barrel traps around the windmill in anticipation of the coming night. The former quirked her lips at Carver as he fixed the helmet hooked to the side of his belt.

Carver threw her a look. "I got them off a dead soldier. Ser Perth and his men are *aware*," he emphasised for Alistair's benefit.

"A secret passage into Redcliffe Castle?" Leliana deduced from Alistair's flustered shout. "How exciting! No one has infiltrated that fortress since its construction. We'll be the first!"

Leliana, Sten, and Alistair followed Carver into the windmill, the latter of whom frowned. "How do you know we're going in?"

"A small force has to protect the town while another sneaks into the fortress," Leliana reasoned. "I do not see any of Mayor Murdock's people here."

Alistair side-eyed her. "And somehow, a group of four people qualifies as the *other* force?"

"Twelve," Carver corrected as they began combing the windmill's interior for letters the size of a fingernail. "Ser Perth and his men will guide us through Redcliffe's layout. Warden Elissa will direct our actions as the tactician. The rest of our party will stay behind to watch the passage entrance and the town."

Sten glanced at Alistair, who defensively hunched. "I prefer not being in charge, and Elissa is the other warden in this mission."

"Dog is coming," Carver continued.

Sten nodded in agreement.

Leliana perked up. "That makes eleven, then."

“The raven that rides Dog is twelfth,” Carver explained.

Alistair pivoted with realisation. “Why again would Redcliffe’s people leave the castle’s rescue to outsiders like *us*?”

“They aren’t,” Leliana beatifically replied. “We’re merely assisting Ser Perth and other Redcliffe knights in retaking the castle. At least, that’s how we’ll spin it when we ask Arl Eamon for a favour.”

Carver and Alistair both froze in mid-search.

Leliana rose a brow at their shock. “Seizing an arl’s legion isn’t like separating mages and Templars. Redcliffe and its beloved arl have to be motivated to take orders from us by more than old treaties.”

Carver coughed. He was actually planning to break into the castle with useful but *limping* Redcliffe soldiers in order to not just learn of the castle’s situation first, but to also control it. Perth and the rest wouldn’t be able to stop the warden’s party from handling demons their way, if it came down to it. The party would also be able to control how information would leave the castle once they grasped the situation.

Which would be helpful if Elissa somehow, someways, caused the entire Guerrin family to die. Despite Carver’s best efforts.

As the saying went — hope for the best, plan for the worst.

Still, good on Leliana for thinking farther ahead.

Carver nudged Alistair. “Shouldn’t you be calling the others over to help us search by now?”

Elissa and the entire party eventually found Teagan’s historiated initials tucked away at the base of the windmill’s staircase. The Bann of Rainesfere’s seal was apparently the letters “TG” within an apple tree, the bannorn’s known flora. The design was cleverly camouflaged by mortar and rough, patterned stone. Depressing the carving’s brick revealed an underground stairway.

Elissa made a sound of delight in the back of her throat. “How *did* you hear of this, anyway?”

“Discussed it with the Redcliffe knights,” Carver vaguely replied. “In emergencies, a Guerrin would lead the castle’s evacuation. We reasoned that this process could be reversed.”

Embossing a brick was the safest way to confirm that the passage was known by the fortress's masters. Signet rings served as the forge-proof signature of nobles, reserved for critical documents and often destroyed with their owners' bodies upon death, and the Guerrin line was no exception. Redcliffe's arls must have overseen the windmill's repairs with every succession to learn of the passage and reseal it by hand. Or pinky.

After Orlais's occupation, Eamon must have seen the pragmatism of assigning his closest bann to the repairs of Redcliffe's peripheral infrastructure. Though the arl's brother, Teagon wouldn't be a foreigner's first suspect for Redcliffe Castle's chief architect. In the worst case scenario where an enemy seized Redcliffe Castle and held Arl Eamon as a hostage, Teagon could gather his forces as bann and reclaim the castle or rescue the arl, whichever was more prudent.

Now, Carver and the warden's party would be performing Eamon's contingency plan. With *none* of the intended characters involved.

Least of all the enemy.

"I'm surprised anyone would have thought to look for Bann Teagon's seal," Elissa chirped as the chosen members readied to enter. "Under an arl, banns aren't typically responsible for enough important documents to be recognisable by seal rather than signature."

Carver quickly deflected. "Alistair is apparently familiar with Bann Teagan."

Alistair flustered. "While I was raised by Arl Eamon, I came to also know his brother well!"

Leliana reliably latched on the telling detail. "Arl Eamon had his bastard aware of signet rings and their importance growing up?"

A resigned groan. "See...it's funny...I might be less a *Guerrin* bastard than a *Theirin* one...."

Perth and the other knights were fetched from outside the windmill while Alistair grudgingly laid out the exact circumstances of his childhood under Eamon. By the time the party of twelve entered the passage, Elissa and others jokingly called Alistair a royal bastard while the knights cluelessly followed them in, none the wiser of a truer meaning.

The invading team quickly found the undead soldiers of Redcliffe

Castle, and in great numbers. Alistair and Elissa buffered the horde up front with their shields, Sten and Carver cut down attacks before they could land on the wardens' openings, Dog kited the possessed mabari of the castle, and Leliana shot down undead that slipped through with help from Perth and the other knights. The shambling enemies in the castle were at first manageable in straight hallways, but if a greater force was controlling them, it was obviously growing aware of the party's presence as the undead began running at them in waves from all sides. The party suffered yet another overwhelming attack before Carver's temper flared.

"Warden Elissa," he addressed in a room the party had secured for themselves. Everyone, especially the injured but wilful knights, was panting. "I suggest a change in approach."

"We need to call for backup," Elissa breathed heavily.

Carver tamped down a strangled noise. "Retreating now is inadvisable. The undead are pouring through the halls and chambers of this castle to find us. Rooms we've passed might become openings for them to stab us in the back." They had already tried. The party's head-on strategy wasn't effective in spaces with more than one entrance.

Elissa hissed with exhaustion. "Carver, page, I know you're nervous on a mission like this, but we must all try our best. Ferelden depends on it."

Carver let her passion slide off his back. He needed Elissa and Alistair to take any attention thrown the party's way while Carver could pursue his plans unnoticed, and leading the *invasion of Redcliffe Castle* would work against that. He also didn't doubt that half of Elissa's words were directed to herself, burdened as she was with an unpredictable role and mission.

Carver removed his helmet and exhaled. "I'm in agreement, Warden. From here, we should proceed as a stack of soldiers and treat each room as a pie."

Scattered blinks answered him. Alistair chirped. "Pie...?"

Carver nodded. At least he had their attention. "When a stack approaches a room's entrance, the third soldier of the stack sends Dog in to knock any enemies in the unseen sectors of the room off-balance, or at least disrupt any preparations they could have made. The first soldier or top of the stack then enters the room and determines if the

first sector or visible slice of the room is clear of enemies. If it isn't, the first soldier claims that sector for clearing. Either way, what follows is that each subsequent soldier in the stack quickly enters the room and clears each unclaimed sector, until the entire room is clear of enemies. Rinse and repeat for every room."

It was a close quarters combat method that Carver had introduced to Maric's Shield, and had performed with his fellow Shielders a few times. However with varying sword reaches between warriors, the method was still rough. Carver didn't share it with a party who couldn't at least wordlessly understand how he'd move any more than he could them.

Strangely enough, however, Elissa's party had become a seamless space for him to silently move about. While they each differed in beliefs, some more than others, they could still fight back-to-back in the dark without fear. Elissa also already had the ingrained training to check her teammates' gear between fights, and ask them to check each other's. So long as Perth and the injured knights stayed out of the stack and watched their backs, and the four of the warden's party *communicated, communicated, communicated*, it was doable.

Again, the method was rough. Carver was replacing a modern-day frag with *Dog*.

"Communication is key," Carver said. This would be their first time doing this. "If your sector is clear, if an enemy's down, if you see a stairwell — share it all. We must each keep our eyes ahead of us so that as a party, we have no blind spots. Announce when you're coming up behind one of us so that we don't surprise each other."

Elissa hummed thoughtfully. "With *Dog*, I'll be the third soldier in the stack. Alistair, you'll be first."

The blonde shrugged. "I'm happy to follow your setup, but given this is Carver's idea, I prefer him leading the communication."

Elissa chuckled. "Ever the page, huh Carver? Very well, Alistair, you'll be second. Carver will be first."

Yeah, sure. They had the rest of Redcliffe Castle to clear anyway.

The party bashed their way down a hallway, then stacked up against the wall of a closed door. Carver patted Alistair's side behind him without looking and murmured for *Dog*, to which Alistair mimicked to Elissa behind him, and the woman moved to the side of the door



where it would open.

With a quick twist of a doorknob, Elissa declared, “Dog! Go in, boy!” and everyone sprung into action.

They cleared and left the room without losing momentum. Then another room, then a hallway of rooms, until the party had developed their own shorthand communication with each other. Some of which made Carver want to cry.

“Doggo!” Elissa declared.

Dog burst in and the party cleared sectors.

“Go go go go!”

“Clear!”

“Room clear, what have you got?”

“Coming to you.”

“Stairwell, stairwell.”

“Clearing stairwell.”

“Doggo!”

“Go go go go!”

“Clear!”

“Enemy down!”

In a flash, they were already taking the next floor of the castle with a cellar-full of the undead Guerrin legion behind them. Carver tossed a morose thought after Thedas’s replacement for “frag out.” Just his luck he would accidentally inspire the word doggo.

A woman’s scream suddenly pierced the air.

“Dog, sit!” Elissa hastily barked.

The party entered the castle’s kitchen to see dozens of coherent servants cowering before Dog. A man in Redcliffe armour stood between the canine and the servants with a sword raised at Carver the instant he stepped in.

“S-Stay back!” the soldier tremulously demanded.

Carver didn’t waver. “Drop the sword.”

“Begone, foul spirit!” the man screeched. “I’ll not let you touch my family!” Behind him, a pregnant woman broke into fresh tears.

Perth and the injured knights limped in and gaped. “*Ser Jory?*”

Pieces clicked. Carver pointed his sword. “Drop the weapon, now.”

“He’s a knight of Redcliffe,” Perth interceded. “One of our own! He’d never harm an ally.”

“No?” Carver decided to play a little. “Then how is he the only knight in this castle who isn’t a mindless, murderous corpse?”

Jory’s face blanched. “I h-had nothing to do with this. I swear to the Maker! I’m just protecting my wife and unborn child!”

“And the other castle servants?” Carver stepped forward, lowering his sword but not sheathing it. “The cellars were remarkably well-maintained, last Ser Perth, Warden Elissa, and the rest of us have checked. Don’t tell me while civilians were risking their lives just to get food from the cellar, you cowered in a kitchen with the pregnant women?”

Jory’s sword shook in his hands. “L-Listen, I’m not—!” He sheathed his blade and held his hands up. “Lord Connor needs the servants to feed and serve Arlessa Isolde, so he isn’t going to change them to undead. I have nothing to do with this!”

Elissa lowered her sword and shield. “Then how do you know all this? How can a boy of ten take command in place of the healthy arlessa, or turn others into undead slaves?”

Jory faltered, eyes shaking guiltily. “My wife, Helena, delivers meals to Arlessa Isolde’s room. I heard it all from her.”

Perth hobbled over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Years of tourneys have dulled your wits, Jory.” The man flinched at the lack of title, and Perth sighed. “I revoke the knighthood I bestowed upon you, and return you to the rank of Sergeant. Should you faithfully keep my teachings in your heart, I know you will eventually earn your original title back.”

Jory's crumbling expression recovered at the closing encouragement.

"He hasn't answered the question," Carver continued brusquely. The rank of sergeant was still two above the rank of page and came with an appropriately family-supporting salary, so Jory had little to complain about. "What foul spirit possesses Lord Connor, and for what reason would it not add the arlessa to its collection of undead?"

Jory's wife helped him into a chair, the shocked sergeant losing strength in his knees. "I'm fine, I just need to sit still for a bit."

"It began a day after the heavy clash in Ostagar," Helena instead offered. "Arl Eamon's closed eyes had twitched while I was replacing the sheets of his pillow. Frail optimism had lit among us attending the top floor of the castle, but Arlessa Isolde hadn't wished to raise false hopes. She had sent out a gag order on the event, banning even mention of Arl Eamon's condition, and Lord Connor...."

"Thought his father was dying," Leliana sadly deduced. "In desperation, he had reached out to a demon. It is a pattern as old as the tale of Flemeth."

The raven on Dog squawked dismissively.

Leliana continued. "In exchange for his parents' lives, young Connor surrendered his own."

The mood plummeted, and a few servants helplessly sniffled.

"What kind of demon is it?" Carver asked.

Helena hesitated. "I'm sorry?"

Elissa turned. "...What are you thinking, Carver?"

He slowly looked aside to the raven as if in thought. "Mm. Blood magic."

The Redcliffe servants, knights, and Jory all *whiplashed* at the suggestion.

Carver returned his gaze to Elissa. "A solution as old as the tale of Flemeth. With a concentrated lyrium potion and proximity to the possessed victim, a blood mage can confront a desire demon in the Fade."

Perth spluttered. "I know I speak for Redcliffe when I say we all

deeply wish for Arl Eamon's full recovery. These are tragic times. But where, in the middle of a *blight*, will we find readily concentrated lyrium or a blood mage?"

The warden's party exchanged looks.

"As a Grey Warden," Elissa vaguely replied, "I assure you that a blight is *the* time for tales. Carver?"

Eh?

At the party's mildly expectant energy, a sudden realisation comfortably settled in Carver. Through a long journey of awkwardness, patience, and hard work, the eclectic members of the warden's party had left the neutral zone of feelings towards Carver and now considered him warmly, to an extent.

Elissa gestured. "Any suggestions on how we proceed from here? We have a possessed ten-year-old and his parents to secure in a castle. I'm open to ideas."

Carver glanced at Jory and Perth. "How much time do we have to breathe?"

"Half an hour," Helena answered. Strong woman. "Lord Connor never sends undead into the servants' quarters or the kitchens unless we are late in serving the arlessa. Her next meal is soon."

Carver thoughtfully sat on a nearby crate, and as if in unspoken agreement, everyone followed suit with ears turned in his direction. One of the knights closed the kitchen door behind him and slid its drawbar across, while two servants moved to the room's remaining entrances to take watch. Elissa was the only person to not sit and instead opted to lean back on a wall, unintentionally drawing the atmosphere's energy around her as the established warden and leader in the room. At least, Carver fervently hoped so. In this setting, he was merely an advisor at most. After all, who better to discuss party communication than a page?

"Our current method heavily relies on Dog to distinguish enemies from friendlies and civilians," Carver commented. "We're getting used to moving together without hesitating or looking over our shoulder, but we don't know yet how to handle rooms with both enemies and innocents inside. Dog can't impart on us a perfect picture of the room in the seconds before we enter it. I have some suggestions, but I'd like to hear your thoughts, Warden, seeing as you're leading this group."

Elissa shrugged. “I understand Dog just fine, but I see what you mean. We should find a way to steal a moment during battle to assess the room’s layout.”

“And risk getting stabbed while we’re thinking?” Sten murmured.

“So the second soldier in the stack shuffles in,” Carver offered. “Especially when entering a corner-fed room after the first soldier, it’s key for the second to step up to the doorway, then swing their foot in sideways to centre their gravity while facing the side of the room. The weaknesses of our armour are the sides where the plates are joined; better to face threats straight-on if we have to pause and let our armour take the hit. Centering our gravity also gives us the perfect balance to brace against a sudden attack, or quickly make one before an enemy in front of us can.”

“After that, we slice the pie,” Alistair chirped.

“Starting from where we’re facing straight-on,” Carver nodded, “then inwards towards the centre of the room. With this technique, we might end up clearing rooms with only the first two soldiers. The rest of us in the stack would just be responsible for overflowing into closets or adjacent open rooms, and covering any closed doors we see. Then we split up into two-man teams to clear the rooms behind the closed doors. Honestly, speed is the most important factor here. No plan survives first contact against the enemy.”

Perth hummed. “I might quote you on that, Page Carver.”

“Not my words,” Carver quickly denied, “and just Carver is fine.” There were a lot of Carvers in Ferelden, right? Fortunately, Carver had kept his helmet on among this great number of people.

Elissa nodded, straightening. “Let’s keep the same stack order as before. Anyone have questions?”

There were none, so the warden's party and Perth’s knights swiftly snuck out of the kitchen for the arl and arlessa’s chambers. The possessed Connor apparently frequented the ground floor of the castle, particularly the main hall, and a mass of undead undoubtedly followed him wherever he went. While the servants attempted to follow their daily routine without suspicion, and Jory remained in the kitchen to actually protect the pregnant and infirm, the invading party agreed to spirit the arl and arlessa away to the secret passage before challenging the worst of the undead army.

For that, they needed stealth.

Leliana made use of a key given to them by Helena. On either side of the doors she opened, two possessed soldiers stood guard. They were stock still and only followed Leliana with their eyes before directing their glazed looks ahead.

Around the corner of the hallway, Carver inwardly cursed. Rather than undead, possessed soldiers dazedly patrolled the top floor. Their markings were a mixture of Redcliffe and Rainesfere. Had Bann Teagan already attempted to sneak in with his soldiers long ago, and ended up ensorcelled? It must have been before the undead army had started threatening the village. Rainesfere was a small bannorn between the Frostback Mountains and Lake Calenhad. With improved trade between Ferelden and Orzammar, it was possible that the improved merchant routes could have allowed the Rainesfere legion to march to Redcliffe with minimal hassle against roaming darkspawn. Though a bannorn's forces rarely amounted to much, a hundred armed soldiers made all the difference when travelling open roads.

Regardless, it was unexpected. On their way up, Carver and the party had encountered much of what he had anticipated, even the local blacksmith's daughter cowering in a pantry whom they had directed to the kitchen for safety. The change in detail reminded Carver of his ongoing internal struggle surrounding god and gamers. Which he was *swiftly* tamping down in the middle of a mission.

Leliana peeked into Arl Eamon's room with the bowed stature of a castle servant. Arlessa Isolde's warm meal sat on a tray in her hands.

"Arlessa—?"

"Stay away!" came a screech. "Don't come in!"

Leliana hesitated halfway through the door, then meekly closed it behind her as she entered. Carver and the rest of the party watched it with bated breath before the door soundlessly swung open. The two guards were then suddenly yanked into the room by their necks and silenced. Or knocked out, as it would seem.

Elissa stepped out from the corner to peer past the opened door. "Bann Teagan?"

Teagan and Isolde blinked at Leliana, the young castle servant who had mock-assassinated two soldiers — at Elissa, who was still sporting the Cousland armour and shield — then at the party behind her,

which included markings of the Grey Wardens, Maric's Shield, and Redcliffe. Additionally, while Elissa had outfitted Sten with an unmarked helmet and armour, Asala was obviously qunari-forged steel.

Teagan caught Isolde as she fainted. The bann stammered. "Lady... Cousland?"

Leliana shed her servant robes to reveal her leather armour underneath. "Arlessa Isolde was apparently hiding Bann Teagan in her room until such a time he could sneak out of the castle — presumably through the secret passage we used."

Teagan twitched at the comment. "How did you—?"

"We don't have much time," Carver quietly cut in. "Where is Arl Eamon?"

Teagan gestured back into the room. "On the bed. You know despite your height, you sound awfully *young* for a soldier of Maric's Shield —"

"He got the armour off dead people," Alistair provided as he squeezed in for the arl.

Elissa followed. "He's baby-faced. Height is all he's got."

Sten strode over. "The Karashok excels at communicating in battle and little else."

Perth and the knights assisted Teagan with Isolde. "He taught us how to slice a pie."

Carver steamed under his helmet. "Let's just...trace our cleared path back to the kitchens...please...."

# Knight

## Chapter Notes

I've added a tag for body dysphoria. Someone else didn't *literally turn off* their sexual desires, they've just been repressing themselves since "childhood." Hope that makes sense. They're an unreliable narrator, so a lot of what they actively not think about - and what they miss in people's reactions around them - is hidden in the unwritten.

Happy lunar new year!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The party stole back to the kitchens and dumped Arl Eamon on a table. The castle servants frantically cleared it of their tools and vegetables as they watched the party's arrival in astonishment. Teagan and Isolde collapsed at another table and hungrily ate the warm food pushed in front of them. While Teagan had been hiding, Isolde had been splitting her meals with her brother-in-law, resulting in a ravenous state for the weeks they had been confined to her room.

With three nobles of import in one room, the invading party found themselves forced to split up. With Perth and the other knights injured, they recognised the efficiency of leaving them with protecting the kitchens, while the warden's party went out to secure Connor. The party thus quickly moved for the main hall where the presence of undead was the thickest.

"What goes there!" the possessed Connor cried out in the midst of battle. "What is it, Mother? I can't see!"

Carver could sense that the stack had overflowed out, and still they were being overwhelmed three to one. Short as Connor was, the party had to swing their blades *warily* lest they cut down the young lord of Redcliffe. The circumstances were far from ideal.

"Is it...a man?" Connor questioned from somewhere nearby. "Nothing like Father! This one isn't limp and pathetic. I hate it!"

"Warden Alistair!" Carver barked. "How do you commit a holy smite?"

To Alistair's credit, he skipped past asking why in the middle of battle.



“Reinforce the immutability of reality!” He grunted against a blow to his shield. “Tap into the world, not the Fade!”

“What, like the power of physics!?” Carver retorted.

Alistair groaned, obviously condensing years of study into a single moment in battle. “When you drop an apple, it will hit the ground. That’s the world order!” He bashed an enemy. “When you catch the apple as it falls, it won’t hit the ground, but you’re still within bounds of the world order! You’re just behaving under a different law!”

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” Carver muttered. Arthur C. Clarke coming in clutch. In which case, magic in Thedas violated the world’s rules of physics, while Templar abilities didn’t, because Thedas was weird.

Carver’s sword glowed white.

Alistair noticed from his peripheral. “Great! Now with me!”

Carver gritted his teeth, imagining himself as a hand interfering with known reality. He mentally condensed the world smaller and smaller, into a moon, a mountain, then finally, an apple — and caught it.

Something tugged him by the naval, and suddenly, together, Alistair and Carver unleashed a white fire that swallowed the entire main hall.

The possessed Connor and all of the undead were thrown to the ground, and before the fire could vanish, Elissa and the rest quickly cut down the undead. Alistair moved ahead to pick up a dazed Connor, while Carver stepped forward to help and instead found the room tilting.

“Ugh—”

Carver caught himself with his sword stabbed to the ground, undoubtedly damaging its tip. A warrior’s cardinal sin. He couldn’t muster the strength to care. All of the energy that had collected in his core had suddenly flushed out of him, leaving him buzzing with hyper-awareness and physical vulnerability. In the corner of his eye, a certain raven flopped down on the ground near Dog, too strong-willed to leave its feathery form despite the sudden spiritual damage.

Sorry, Morrigan. If the woman wanted to follow the wardens around as instructed by her mother, she would have to do so as part of the party and resign herself to human interaction. The mage wasn’t going

to be able to leave the Blight without a few friends.

Alistair approached Carver with a confused boy in his arms and his helmet hooked to his belt. "You picked that up remarkably fast."

Carver panted, sheathing his sword. "Had a good teacher."

"Ha!" Alistair looked down and gestured to Carver. "This kid is several years older than you, yet look where he is now. With your bravery, I don't doubt you'll soon be a great man yourself!"

Connor looked at Carver with bright eyes. "Are you a knight, ser?"

Carver removed his helmet to gently nod. "That I am."

Connor grabbed a clasp of Alistair's armour in comfort. "I don't know what's happening. I don't remember how I got here, or where Mother is. I blink my eyes, and I'm somewhere else."

"Don't worry your little head over it," Alistair assured. "You're a child; your only job is to be a child. Just focus on the present for me, and we'll take you to your mother."

Carver took to the front while the rest of the party grouped around Alistair, just in case. As Carver passed Elissa, he noticed her longingly watching Alistair soothe Connor. Carver respectfully turned away.

The party reunited the Guerrin family to overwhelming gratitude. Apparently amnesiac, Connor seemed to have a stronger grasp on reality while he was near his parents, somehow subconsciously suppressing the demon. The formerly possessed soldiers in the top floor began wandering downstairs to witness the servants restoring the castle to its former glory, and the soldiers began clearing out the undead bodies to help. Teagan directed everyone's movements as the temporary arl of Redcliffe while Isolde watched over Connor, making sure he wouldn't slip back into the demon. The warden's party caught a moment to regroup and breathe in the meantime.

"I don't want to clear a room anytime soon," Elissa grumbled. "Let's head to the Brecilian Forest next."

Wynne piped up. "I had a student once in my irresponsible years who had presumably fallen under a Templar's blade. However, he had always spoken of fleeing to the Dalish, and I wonder if he might be with them in the forest."

“I know what you’re going to say,” Elissa commented, “but you’re paler than usual, Wynne, and I know you exhausted yourself last night. I suggest the party splits up for this one, let a few of us recover in Redcliffe while we can.”

“Then you’re joining Wynne,” Alistair determined. “Last night, you weren’t able to equip your shield in time for the horde that greeted us. I’m surprised you’re still using your arm.”

Elissa delicately shifted in place. “It’s just a fracture.”

Wynne gestured for her to remove her gauntlets. “Let me see. Hm... whatever it was when you first looked at it, your arm is now definitely broken. I can relieve the pain and mend your muscles, but the bone itself must heal naturally.”

“Squishies are so weak,” Shale remarked.

Carver frowned at the situation, unsettled. “You should stay in Redcliffe with Wynne,” he sighed. “Coordinate with Soldier’s Peak to have them send over Avernus, and with Kinloch Hold for the concentrated lyrium. In fact, here’s a list of the warden recruits whose phylacteries haven’t been destroyed yet. Senior Enchanter, I’m sure you’ll be able to make use of it.”

Wynne accepted the slip of paper with glittering eyes. “You assume correctly, young man.”

“We can’t leave our injured behind without protection,” Alistair continued, straightening.

Sten pushed him back down where he was sitting. “You are the only other Grey Warden on this mission.”

“But—!”

“I’ll stay.” Heads whipped Shale’s direction, and she huffed. “There are too many pigeons in this place. I will remedy this.”

Alistair gave a stilted laugh, paling. “Redcliffe is enormous, how exactly will you—?”

“It’s decided then,” Elissa quickly cut off. “Alistair, take the others to the Brecilian Forest and show the ancient treaties to the Dalish. I know not the true nature of their ‘ailment,’ but they should respect their ancestors’ oaths. Hopefully you will return soon.”

“Me too,” Alistair admitted with a sigh. “Let’s pray the Dalish share their ancestors’ concern of the Blight.”

X

“Turn back.”

The party halted, thrown off. The Dalish archers that were positioned between them and the Dalish camp lowered their bows.

“We recognise the Grey Wardens,” an archer shared, “and that is the only reason why we haven’t shot you down on sight. Leave before such respect expires.”

“We’re in the middle of the Fifth Blight,” Alistair spluttered. “Our victory or loss in this war will affect you, too!”

“Clan Siona suffers its own troubles,” came the reply. “We have no room for outsiders at this time. I doubt you shemlen would understand.”

“We have ancient treaties signed by your people,” Alistair pressed.

“Then show us.”

“They’re *ancient!* The paper will crumble if I wave them around!”

The archers grudgingly relented and allowed the party to meet their Keeper, who glanced once at the treaties and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I thought you had come for the woman,” Zathrian confessed. “After all this time, I feared she had no one who cared to look for her.”

Alistair’s brows furrowed. “The woman?”

Zathrian gestured, and the suspicious elves crowding around the party reluctantly stepped away to reveal their healing cots. Dozens of elves lied around moaning with horrific lacerations across their bodies, and among them was a white-haired woman so motionless that she seemed dead at first. When Alistair curiously stepped over to her, she caught sight of him and started panicking.

“No! No more! I can see the sky, *I can see the sky!*”

Alistair rapidly backpedalled with confused shock as the woman held herself and struggled to breathe.

Leliana surged forward to tenderly calm the woman and wipe at her brow with a kerchief. The Chantry sister murmured soothingly despite the woman's violent movements, until finally the patient stopped chanting and only shook with sobs, barely responsive to Leliana's prompting. At the very least, the woman wasn't flinching at Leliana's gentle hands.

Alistair shuffled aside to the Keeper. "By her armour, she's a Grey Warden."

"She came from the ground," Zathrian shared, "so gaunt and filthy that we had at first mistaken her for a darkspawn. She hadn't cared for our hostility and merely sealed the earth behind her before promptly fainting."

Carver gestured. "Is there a risk of darkspawn surfacing from where she came?"

To Zathrian's right, his First scoffed. "Even mindless evil wouldn't try." At their stares, she elaborated, "The hole she came from is still spilling lava."

Carver choked. What manner of *fireball* could have reduced a hole in the earth into a *volcano*?

"We have healed her the best we could," the First, Lanaya, continued. "However, I suspect she was already spent even before she had destroyed the tunnel she had dug to the surface. Her mana reserves are dangerously low, and we're already rationing our lyrium between our healers."

"Sickness alone doesn't beset your warriors," Zevran sharply noted. "Those are focused slashes on their bodies."

"Claw marks," Sten confirmed, "unfitting for a bear."

"Evil is not restricted to the underground," Carver commented. "You are long-lived, Keeper Zathrian. I can see it in your eyes. Whatever spell sustains you is also poisoning your surroundings, as is the nature of curses."

Lanaya and not a few elves reacted hotly. "Watch your tongue, shemlen! Our Keeper is a remnant of the ancient days when the People lived long. Do not mislabel our blessings as witchcraft!"

"I speak only of what I see," Carver stated, "or those are not the claw

marks of a werewolf.”

Heads turned for the healing cots at the unexpected remark.

Zevran hummed. “After all our time on the road with our dear Leliana, even I have picked up patterns in urban myths. Werewolves do not come naturally.”

“They are mindless beasts,” Zathrian dismissed, turning to Carver. “You have a nose for magic, I will give you that, shemlen. However, do not seek a connection where there is none. I am a mage, which is why you sense magic from me. If the forest is poisoned, it is from man’s atrocities committed against the Dalish who have lived here before.”

The elves around them nodded, and Carver backed off.

Alistair, however, stepped in. “If we end the threat of werewolves, your clan must be able to assist us wardens.”

“We already have,” Zathrian rejected, pointing to the white-haired woman afar. “Should you clear the forest of werewolves, we will extend the same gratitude you will show us for rescuing one of your own.”

“This is a waste of time,” Sten scoffed. “I have heard great tales of the Grey Wardens and their strength — and none of the Dalish. We should just take the saarebas warden and leave these elves to their stubbornness. The Wardens should be able to handle the archdemon on their own.”

Zathrian straightened. “The Dalish are *plenty* strong,” he refuted. “You will need us, Warden!”

“Then it’s settled,” Alistair quickly caught on. “We’ll kick the werewolves out of your forest.”

An archer twitched. “What!? We must kill them! *Nir din’an sahlín!*”

“No,” Lanaya corrected, “*nir halam sahlín*. Kill one werewolf and have only death, or find a cure to their curse and secure our lives. We must not just kill them, but *end* their kind.”

“It will be done,” Carver concluded before the Dalish could take back their words. “Allow us to re-equip ourselves for the forest, then we shall depart for where the werewolves reside.”

The party busily prepared themselves for the quest while Clan Siona provided minimum resources required, with much hassle. With Elissa stayed Dog and Morrigan, who apparently chose to accompany the female warden. This left Leliana and the four boys to investigate what they needed. Zathrian freely shared his biased understanding of Witherfang, and how the wolf's heart might be used to create a cure. However, Lanaya required intense negotiating before she handed over the clan's map of the forest.

The clan craftsman, Varathorn, had to also be bribed with extra coins before he opened his station up to trade with them, given that dwarven merchants valued the Ferelden sovereign with Orzammar's shift in currency. Carver tiredly dumped the few coins he had to purchase a pair of Dalish gloves and finally shoved them Zevran's way without a word.

"I'm flattered you'd court me with a gift, Carver—" the assassin began, when he abruptly realised the treasure he had been handed. "These gloves...."

Carver dropped on a tree stump away from the clan's storytelling circle. Their campfire cast a warm glow and emotion on everything, even in the daytime. "Antivan smithing is good and all, but your gloves can only handle so much. I thought these would be better for you."

Zevran joined him on a nearby log as the clan's storyteller launched into a ballad about the Exalted March of the Dales. "My gloves are metal."

"But you like leather," Carver recalled. "Can't stop looking at it among Bodahn's wares. You even sometimes smell it."

"Hey!"

"Not judging," Carver placated. "It's just an observation. No one visibly expresses fascination with material things like you do, then only talks about assassinations and gorgeous people. Despite your pride as an Antivan Crow, you don't seem to care much for yourself."

"Possessions don't equate to self-care," Zevran snorted. "One of the greatest pleasures in life is expertly stealing someone's life without getting caught, or lying with stimulating company."

Carver hummed. "Do you feel the same way when you look at those gloves?"

Zevran's fingers stilled around the Dalish gear in his hands.

Carver gazed ahead to the fire. "I can't speak to what makes you happy, Zevran. I just thought of you when I saw the gloves. Don't think too much into it."

More elves gathered around the campfire to share in the oral tale. A few children piped up to add to the history lesson.

"I don't understand much of what they're saying," Zevran murmured, watching. "My mother came from a clan before having me in Antiva. She imparted none of her culture with me, never spoke in Dalish to me when we were in front of others, and in a small shack, we were always with company. In the end when she passed away, all I had of her and her past life was a pair of leather gloves."

Carver didn't look away from the fire. "You were a child when she passed."

"That's how the Crows prefer it," Zevran confirmed. "If you survive training, you'll be a Crow by age thirteen. You can then make your house a lot of money for forty years before your body starts ageing."

"You were a child when you were sold," Carver reiterated. "You weren't with your mother when she died. You weren't even allowed possessions when you joined the Crows, but you held on to her gloves because you wanted to remember her. That's why they're special to you."

"I'm proud of being a Crow," Zevran hotly corrected. "I'm one of the *best*. I'm also not overly fond of my mother or her 'people.' I saw them before, back near Antiva, and I know they're not the likes of my childhood fantasies. The past doesn't have me beholden to it." His head dipped, gaze falling to the gloves in his hands. "If there is a third great pleasure in life, it's just a shapeless thing that cannot be grasped by one's hands, like the smell of leather."

The ballad came to a close, and the elves that were gathered around the fire launched into a discussion about the Dales. Past the shifting bodies, Alistair could be spotted awkwardly answering racially-heavy historical questions with the children. The warden must have been pulled in while asking the storyteller about Witherfang.

"All I've been talking about is myself," Zevran realised, turning his gaze. "What about you, Carver, what makes you happy?"



Carver straightened, making to leave. "I don't need anything."

"That won't stop me from getting you something," Zevran warned with a quirk of his lips. "The Crows aren't big on disposable income, but I have skilled hands. I might make you a gift. Or, ah, *kill* you a gift."

"I'm good."

"You know my other talents." Zevran wiggled his brows.

"I'm *good*."

Carver quickly fled to the other side of camp and bumped into a Dalish hunter. The elf apologised, though the accident was Carver's fault.

"You're distracted," Carver noted, dismissing his apologies. "Are you injured?"

The hunter shook his head. "No no, I'm not skilled enough to partake in scouting against the werewolves. I can't even hunt enough for two people," he mumbled.

Carver paused at the irony. "Love troubles?"

The hunter met eyes with Carver, and a wordless connection sparked between them.

"Her name is Gheyne," the hunter bemoaned. "She won't become bondmates with me unless I hone my archery. She's thinking about our future children."

Carver walked with the hunter through camp. "If she's already thinking that far, that means she's willing to wait for you."

"I don't want to keep her waiting forever," the hunter pointed out. "No matter how much I work on myself, I can't seem to be able to provide for more than one person. She's better off with a more skilled hunter."

Carver looked ahead to a female archer periodically glancing their way. "Would you be happy with that?"

The hunter hung his head. "It's not about me, but her."

Carver brought them to a stop and patted the hunter on the back, like

a hypocrite. “I don’t think you can speak for Gheyne. Why don’t you two talk it out instead?”

The hunter lifted his gaze to see the archer staring at him in shock. Apparently, the female elf hadn’t realised how deeply her companion had been meditating on her words.

“Oh, Cammen, that hadn’t been my intention...!”

“No, Gheyne, if I were more reliable...!”

Carver stepped away as the two lovers reconnected. He had bought herbs from Varathorn, and wished to grind together a salve before the party set out for the thicket. By the time Carver finished topping off five small jars, Alistair and Sten had finished gathering information and tending to their heavy gear. Zevran quickly followed with polished knives, two shortswords, and his hands clad in leather gloves.

Carver noted Zevran’s weapons, and handed out his salves to the party. “Leliana’s done with the patient?”

Alistair accepted his jar with pleasant surprise. “Ah, yeah. I figured if we’re heading into a living forest to hunt down a magic wolf, we’ll need our resident assassin properly armed with his things.”

Zevran chuckled. “I’m *touched* by your trust.”

“Please don’t say it like that,” Alistair begged.

Leliana stood up among the healing cots, catching the party’s eye. They walked over as she beckoned and lowered her voice.

“The warden’s name is Solona,” she shared, glancing back. “I think I will remain here while the party hunts down werewolves. Solona is... broken in ways I can’t describe. I can only impart to her the same words that Mother Dorothea gave me when I was at my lowest. Her will is admirable, however – she wants to hunt down darkspawn even now. Oh, is this for me?”

Leliana received Carver’s salve. His hands were minutely trembling.

Four pairs of eyes turned his way.

“Solona...” he breathed thinly. “My cousin was born dark-haired.” He promptly pivoted for Solona’s bedside. The party spoke up behind him, but Leliana helpfully silenced them and gave Carver his space.

Solona noticed Carver approach and stand next to her cot. She tiredly stared at him, likely willing him away.

Carver's lips thinned as he gazed down at her. "This...is cruel of me, I know. But I have questions."

Solona exhaled sharply, rage reenergizing her. "You expect me to answer?" She rose in her cot, sitting up with unexpected strength. "No one came looking for me. You can't *possibly* comprehend anything I would have to say. Not a word!"

"...About broodmothers?" Carver said.

Solona stiffened with wide eyes.

Carver lowered himself on a nearby tree stump. "I agree. Nothing I can imagine can compare to what you've experienced. However, I am...responsible, and exceedingly greedy. That's why, despite my better judgement, I must ask..." He held his shaking hands together, forcing them still. When he spoke again, his voice barely left him. "...How many are still down there?"

His eyes kept straying to Solona's hair turned white with stress. He couldn't maintain eye contact with her.

Solona stared at him, boyishly-faced and slumped in his suit of armour.

"...None."

Carver flinched. "I'm sorry."

"Oddly enough, I believe you," Solona murmured, tears sprouting in the corners of her eyes. "Everyone down there with me, they had — we had all realised that we needed to work together to get out of there. Some of us *volunteered* to become the next broodmother, or the next blood experiment for this...sapient...darkspawn, so that the rest of us could keep hatching a plan. The oldest among us began *offering* to be eaten by our turned comrades, to buy us young ones time. They had families to return to, they had already spent their full lives fighting — why *them*? It's not *fair*!"

Carver offered his kerchief, and Solona used it to wipe her face.

She hiccuped with broken sobs. "N-Near the end, there weren't a lot of us left. I began to think we would never be able to escape. Did you

know? The strongest poison in the world is *hope*.” She bit her lip to swallow a sea of grief. “But the others persisted, told me they’d be right behind me when it was time to run. They gave me their weapons, their clothes, their *encouragement*, and stayed back to stall the darkspawn. They fought with nothing but their *fists*.”

Carver turned away as she blew her nose, and his eyes fell on a golden sword propped against her cot. The blood froze in Carver’s veins.

Solona sniffled. “The original wielder had been the first one to think of escape. She saw her vision through by fighting to the end and giving me her sword.”

Carver swallowed thickly. “Sounds like her.”

“You knew Ser Cauthrien?” Solona straightened.

Carver nodded. “She was the one who knighted me and swore me into Maric’s Shield.”

A heavy silence fell between them.

“You must be Ser Carver,” Solona finally decided. “You were the one who discovered the blight and reported it to the king.”

Carver denied it under her brittle, bright gaze. “I merely compiled a report.”

“She also said you were humble.” Solona’s lips quirked.

She moved, surprising Carver when she lifted the sword from the side of her cot and cradled it in her arms.

“As a mage, I can’t make full use of this more than I can a staff.” Solona looked at Carver. “As surely as you started this war...will you end it?”

Bright blue eyes met gazes, one electric and one steel.

Carver rose from his tree stump and knelt. “On my life, and those we have lost.”

Solona extended Summer Sword to him firmly. “And those we have yet to save.”

Chapter End Notes

Is Carver attracted to Zevran? Yes. He's attracted to all the males in this game, lmao

I'm confused on how to address wardens, both the organisation and the people. What even is proper capitalization (and lower casing)? orz

# Karasten

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Foggy and Badger,” Sten stated.

Carver glanced back as the party crossed a stream. “What?”

“You knew the Karasaad corpses in Redcliffe,” Sten observed, stepping where Carver did. “They were in the same military organisation as you, and you identified them by name.”

The party moved from the stream to a path between two cliffs, wary of their vulnerable position. Carver distractedly made a noise of confirmation.

“Maric’s Shield,” Alistair muttered from the front of the line, “and a knight at that. You don’t have to answer to your fellow knights; the only ones who in fact stand above you are the captain of the king’s army, the commander of the king’s army, and the king himself. Yet I thought you were a *page!*”

Carver shrugged. “I do run errands.”

“Of the significant kind!” Alistair spluttered. “Who assigned you to mine and Elissa’s mission? The captain of the king’s army?”

“That would have been Ser Cauthrien,” Carver replied.

A heavy pause followed. “Teyrn Loghain, then?” Alistair deduced. “Come on, Ser Carver, work with me here.”

“Just *Carver* is—”

“Impossible,” Sten remarked. “A sten commands an average of sixty men, the equivalent of a Ferelden ‘sergeant.’ *This* one is a rank above: a ‘knight,’ or a karasten. If he didn’t receive his orders from his kithshok, he received them from the Kathaban or the Arishok. Neither would *assign* a karasten to a joint operation, but would rather send him to *lead* it.”

“Kathaban?” Alistair echoed, head spinning. “Arishok?”

“Il Artiglio di Stato Maggiore della Marina,” Zevran helpfully identified, “e della Difesa. The houses of the Antivan Crows each pursue personal interests, but we collectively prioritise our homeland’s safety from external threats. The strongest houses’ leaders, the Talons, each hold one of eight titles while they prove themselves capable of keeping it. *The Talon of the Navy Staff* excels the most at naval combat through their skills, the Crows under them, and their connections to the Felicissima Armada. *The Talon of the Defence Staff* is the strongest Talon and commands the other Talons in the name of the country.”

Sten grunted. “The Antivan Crows are the reason why the Antaam avoids Antiva.”

“Ferelden’s ranks aren’t nearly as structured as the Qunari’s,” Carver deflected, “and don’t have a strong comparison to the Crows. Teyrn Loghain commands Ferelden’s navy merely as part of his Lieutenant-Commander duties.”

Alistair hummed thoughtfully. “Uh...so a Lieutenant-Commander is like a Talon of the Navy Staff, or a Kathaban? That makes our Head-Commander, King Cailan, a Talon of the Defence Staff or an Arishok!”

Wasn’t this man’s head supposed to be made of cheese!?

Alistair glanced back at Carver. “Why *would* you be assigned to this mission? Wouldn’t Teyrn Loghain or King Cailan rather put you in charge of it?”

Sten scoffed. “I just said that.”

Zevran chuckled. “It seems *you* were assigned to *Carver’s* mission, Alistair.”

The warden grumbled. “I would have honesty from you now, Carver!”

“...Zevran speaks true,” Carver reluctantly confirmed. “The knowledge I shared with Warden Theron in Ostagar is buying King Cailan time — the last ingredient for the king’s recovery is just archdemon blood.”

“So Duncan sent me and Elissa,” Alistair concluded. “Maker, Carver, you’re the reason why we even *have* a mission!”

“Duncan would have sent you two after the archdemon anyway,” Carver weakly defended.

“How would you know that?” Alistair asked.

Carver said nothing.

“Maker’s breath,” Alistair swore, “you *are* in Maric’s Shield.”

Carver paused. “Quiet.”

“I’m not moving past this that quickly—”

Zevran pulled Alistair back by his elbow, picking up the noise as well. “There’s someone ahead,” he whispered.

Sten peered over everyone’s heads and the worst of the forest’s vegetation. “An injured elf,” he noted. “He’s alone.”

Carver grabbed Alistair’s other elbow before he could react. They were traversing Clan Siona’s main path through the forest, only to find a sole wounded hunter in the middle of it? Despite Zathrian’s assertions, the werewolves of the forest were sapient — capable of reasoning, speech, and complicated anger. Now, with Zathrian finally in the woods again, they were also desperate.

This was a trap.

Zevran murmured to Carver. “How are you with climbing?”

The party was currently between two cliffs the same height as Sten. Trees like redwoods grew upon the elevated earth, their branches intertwining and stretching wide to replace the sky with an emerald canopy, and their roots similarly permeated the earth beneath them. Ferns, huckleberries, and other shrubs concealed the forest floor and made it difficult to not trip over the roots without staring at one’s feet. The trees’ lowest branches were higher than a house’s roof, but the cliff sides were notably woven with twisted wood.

Carver shifted. “I’m not exactly wearing light armour.” Like Sten and Alistair, Carver fell under a warrior class. The werewolves would hear Carver moving before he and Zevran would be able to surround them.

Sten lowered his voice. “There’s a bow and half-empty quiver near the injured elf.”

And Carver was knighted.

“Sten,” Carver reluctantly decided, “dash in, grab the hunter, and dash the way back to Clan Siona’s camp. Your armour is heavy enough to take glancing blows from the ambush. Alistair, you’ll run in before



him; use your shield to protect Sten while he's picking up the hunter. I'll come in last and cover the both of you while we retreat. Our resident assassin will concurrently turn the ambush around on them. Once your stealth fails, Zevran, kite as many werewolves as you can to lessen the burden on us." He paused, looking at Sten. "Can you handle crossing the stream?"

"Seheron is my homeland," Sten curtly stated. "There, when you aren't in a jungle, you're in a rainforest."

Fair enough.

Zevran silently scaled the cliffside and vanished over the edge, and the warriors of the party lined themselves up. Carver waited before patting Sten's side, who patted Alistair's, and they burst into action.

A werewolf immediately pounced on Alistair's raised shield as he bashed his way to the fallen hunter, and through the dirt kicked up by the scuffle, Carver bleakly witnessed Sten scoop up the wounded hunter. As the qunari turned, Carver snatched the bow and quiver and loosed an arrow into a werewolf's eye before its claws could separate Carver's head from his body. Carver blindly hooked the quiver to his belt as he moved in front of Sten, catching the fallen werewolf with his chest plate.

Alistair stepped back, shielding Sten's retreat, and Carver sensed the moment to begin moving back himself. He quickly fired three arrows across his field of vision, then another burst. The distance between the werewolves and the party grew wider with Zevran's assistance as the werewolves' focus split. Alistair finally pummeled the last enemy in his range and turned after Sten.

"Retreat!" Carver called out.

He pivoted and ran after Alistair's shrinking back. The forest blurred past them, time becoming something measured by their adrenaline. When they finally came to, they were tripping over a Dalish patrol halfway to camp.

"Giving up already?" a hunter mocked, only for Sten to drop his luggage on them. The hunter fumblingly caught their injured clansman.

The party checked on each other, caught their breath, and straightened to head back in.

Another hunter in the patrol slapped their comrade upside the head. “Ma serannas!” they sent after their backs.

Carver sighed as they trudged deeper, away from the patrol. “The werewolves don’t seem open to communication.”

Zevran snorted. “What gave that impression?”

“Better question is why would they,” Sten commented. “They are blinded by primal instincts, no better than an unlearned imekari. Qunari know how to see past our bloodlust and leash it.”

Alistair jerked. “The werewolves are sentient? But the Keeper Zathrian said—”

“The elf,” Sten stated, “can speak no better of werewolves than humans can of qunari.”

“You’re saying the werewolves are like qunari,” Alistair interpreted, to which Sten scoffed.

“I’m not.”

Alistair grumbled. “Can you speak clearer?”

Carver threw him a bone. “Ask yourself why qunari would harass Clan Siona like this, and you’ll get an idea of how fishy this feels.”

Zevran hummed. “The werewolves have no intention of converting the Dalish, nor are the Dalish threatening the werewolves’ home. We have to use a *map* to find our way to where the most werewolves have been sighted. The Dalish are camped nowhere near them.”

“The werewolves are protecting something more precious,” Carver helpfully deduced, then stopped the party. “Ahead.”

“One of the beasts,” Sten observed. “It’s in pain. Allow me to guess — you wish to reason with it?”

Carver approached the werewolf, and the party moved after him. The werewolf noticed them and clawed at the ground, keening with animosity and frustration. It didn’t run at them or flee.

“You were an elf,” Carver noted. “From Clan Siona. How and when were you turned?”

“No closer!” the werewolf barked. “This lycanthropy is a disease, and I

wish to spread it no further!”

“Nice scarf,” Zevran ignored the mood.

The werewolf twitched its claws around the fabric in its grip. “Don’t tell my husband. I died from the disease before I could fully turn, understand? The truth would ruin him!”

“You are capable of reason,” Alistair murmured with horror, “and selfless love. Are the others like you?”

“How ignorant,” Zevran teased. Alistair elbowed him.

“You are more than your new instincts,” Carver placated, kneeling down to eye level. “We seek a cure. Allow us to help.”

If the werewolf was aware of Carver’s hand warily resting on his sword hilt, she didn’t display it. “The other werewolves lie — they say the Keeper knows how to dispel this curse, but Zathrian has already tried. Why else would the clan continue to suffer? Please, this sickness is burning through me. Soon I will lose sight of friend or foe. Kill me now while I can still ask for it!”

“The other werewolves are capable of speech,” Carver pointed out from her information. “They found a way to maintain their sanity, and you can too.”

“My spousal love can only help me this far,” the werewolf denied.

Carver glanced over his shoulder at Sten, then at the werewolf. “Do you believe that even now, you’re part of the world order?”

She squinted through her throbbing senses. “I-I can’t say whether or not this curse is driven by the Fade, or by nature—”

“I don’t speak of the curse,” Carver corrected, pointing at the scarf in her claws.

She straightened. “I can’t call myself an elf anymore, or Dalish, but...I don’t identify myself as a mindless beast! *My soul alone* still belongs here!”

Sten huffed, grasping Carver’s intentions. “I am no priestess. My grasp of the Qun’s wisdom is restricted to my role. This one will suffer should I speak of the Qun in ignorance.”

“You don’t need to ascertain her role in society,” Carver reasoned.

“Just comfort her with the truth that the Qun has taught you. All living things — even locusts — have a nature, and the world order is nature. Self-control and having a place to belong allows one to find internal balance. Help her realise that her suffering right now is simply from internal imbalance.”

Sten paused, then crouched down to speak quietly with the werewolf. Carver rose to join Alistair and Zevran.

“The werewolves blame Zathrian,” Alistair observed, eyes straying to the victim’s scarf. “If he was guilty, though, why would he let his clan deteriorate this far? No, I should think like Carver — why would Zathrian curse the original victims in the *first* place?”

Carver twitched at his name, and Zevran happily cut him off. “The Dalish proudly claimed their Keeper was several lifetimes old. That’s about as long as tales of werewolves have been around, no? The same tales insist that lycanthropy is born of injustice.”

“The original victims wronged Zathrian first?” Alistair followed. “Why then should we try to talk to them? Ugh, I prefer fighting darkspawn.”

Carver thought of the Architect, and coughed. “Anyway, we can’t be sure the other werewolves are even guilty of the original crime. Before the blight, travellers who cut through the Brecilian Forest for Gwaren never reported werewolf sightings, nor went hunting for them. The ones alive today must be descendents of the first werewolves, and only now are they proactively seeking victims.” At the looks directed his way, he defended, “I’m a nerd, I read records.”

Alistair fretted. “Are the current werewolves innocent, then? They might not have wronged Zathrian at the beginning, but they still attacked his clan. The clan members have nothing to do with whatever hostility lies between Zathrian and the original werewolves.”

Sten and the female werewolf stood up in that moment, the latter now calm with newfound clarity.

“The other werewolves live in harmony with the forest,” the werewolf shared. “So long as you seek conflict with the werewolves, the forest will reject you. Like me, you will wander in circles until you faint.”

“We fought a few sylvans when we left the camp’s bounds,” Carver recalled. “I don’t suppose the forest speaks through a big tree?”

“The Grand Oak is merely friends with the forest,” the werewolf denied, “but his favour can’t hurt. I can point you to his direction, but I do not wish to move until I have meditated through the rest of my affliction.” The party accepted this, and she saw them off. “Thank you, Sten. Karasten.”

Sten murmured something back in qunlat while Carver twitched at the address, lost on how to react, and followed the party.

With a new direction marked on their map, they traced twisting and winding routes through the living forest, cautiously tracking the days through the angle of sunlight filtered by green canopies. It was a struggle to maintain course. Twice they tripped over a tombstone that resulted in battle against skeletons and revenants, and twice they crossed paths with odd characters. A former Circle student of Wynne’s amiably exchanged messages to be sent back to Wynne, while a mad hermit greeted the party’s presence with less civility and pushed them into a game of questions. When Zevran, bored, looted the tree stump being used by the hermit as a home, the hermit blew a gasket and attacked them on sight. They hastily slew the riddler and went on their way.

The entire trip at least proved fruitful. The party persuaded Sten to replace his armour with the juggernaut pieces found in the tombstones, and upon meeting the Grand Oak, Zevran handed over an acorn that the hermit had apparently stolen from the sylvan. The Grand Oak rewarded the party with a sliver from its branches, which proved the sylvan’s name was misleading. Resembling the Thedosian redwoods around him, the Grand Oak’s branches were as wide as a grown man and stretched out to the sky. When Zevran carried the sliver, he appeared equipped with a wooden sword.

At that point, night fell, and the party made camp. Or, tried to. They fell victim to a sloth demon that erased three full days of memory from them. When they came to, they found themselves dehydrated, starving, and drooling in the middle of their unfinished campsite. Sten had apparently realised the demon’s work first and cut it down the instant its illusions fell, but they had still lost a lot of time. The party quickly restored their energy, refilled their waterskins, and tripped over their third tombstone.

The revenant there *got wrecked*.

By the time they arrived at the werewolves’ lair, they were short-tempered.

“Turn back now, outsiders,” a werewolf warned at the steps of an elven ruin. “Our quarrel is with Zathrian.”

Carver sighed crossly. “What is your name?”

The party looked at him, and the startled werewolf replied, “Swiftrunner.”

“Why give a warning now?” Carver asked. “I recognise you from the ambush many days ago, Swiftrunner. You and your people appeared ready for violence then.”

The werewolf shifted. “Zathrian has sent you after the Lady of the Forest, has he not?” He regained his confidence. “That is why you outsiders have travelled this far! Well, we werewolves will not let you kill her!”

“What lady?” Zevran fittingly asked.

“The forest itself,” Swiftrunner bared his teeth, “the spirit that Zathrian has forced into Witherfang, and cursed our ancestors in effect!”

“The lady who bars you from attacking innocents,” Carver inferred, gesturing past him. “Confined as she is, she still has a connection with the forest, else we wouldn’t be allowed near here. Does she know of what you’ve done to Clan Siona?”

Swiftrunner recoiled. “W-We have no choice! If Zathrian wishes to rescue his clan, he must lift the curse!”

“Negotiate with him,” Alistair suggested.

“We have!” Swiftrunner snarled. “Every time he has passed through the forest, the Lady has reached out to him, and every time has she been rejected! Past our desperation lies only an animal’s death!”

“We don’t have time for this,” Alistair grumbled. “We don’t even know if anything you or Zathrian tell us is true.” He turned to the party. “Let’s sit Zathrian and the Lady down to have them speak plainly on this topic. If their stories don’t align, I’ll feed them to Carver.”

Sten nodded, and Zevran chirped, “Sounds good.”

Carver blinked. “Wait, what?”

“Alright,” Alistair clapped his hands, “show us to your Lady.”

“As if I would!” Swiftrunner rebuked. “*You* bring Zathrian here first! No, that’s your plan, isn’t it? You’re after the Lady! Well, I won’t let you!”

Carver drew Summer Sword from its sheath, just enough to allow its sharp brilliance to peek out.

Swiftrunner stumbled back and fled into the ruins. The party watched him vanish down shattered stone steps on all fours.

Alistair stared. “Hopefully their Lady is more reasonable.”

X

The party turned into another dead end. Alistair fidgeted with his helmet, wishing to wipe sweat that tickled his brow. “Why are we talking to the Lady first, again?”

Zevran disabled another trap in the ruined temple. “It was your idea.”

“If we retreat now, the forest may never accept us again,” Carver commented. He, too, was quickly tiring of the maze-like ruins.

The party retraced their footsteps and turned a different direction, stumbling into a series of connected chambers. Zevran picked up a stone tablet, glancing at the etched elven. He noticed when Carver looked over his shoulder.

“What say you, knight of knights?” Zevran shook the tablet. “Want to say a prayer?”

Carver maintained a neutral expression. “You just looted a sarcophagus.”

Zevran shrugged, replacing the tablet and moving on to the next room. “The old man didn’t have much on him anyway.”

An earthen jug, a pool of clear water, and an altar awaited in the next room. A pair of doors on the other end of the room refused to budge, even with a shove from Sten. Alistair threw caution to the wind in an uncertain environment; he removed his helmet to breathe, grabbed the jug, and filled it with water from the pool. Carver snatched the jug from him before he could take a sip.

“Hey!”

Carver placed the jug on the altar and gestured at the faded

inscriptions on it. “Zevran, I don’t suppose you can read these, too?”

Zevran mirthfully sauntered over. “Those are faded beyond recognition, friend. Why would you think—” He halted. “The tablet was in Antivan.”

“You mean Common,” Alistair corrected. He and Zevran shared looks.

“The tablet must have been carved with ancient magic,” Carver deduced. “Its intent is delivered to those who gaze upon it. Sten?”

The qunari had apparently not even glanced at the tablet, pragmatically moving past the distraction. He frowned at Carver from in front of the sealed doors. “Get to the point.”

“We need Zevran to pray,” Carver replied. He clicked his tongue at Zevran’s immediate expression. “Stop thinking like that. What purpose would an ancient elven structure contain sarcophagi, unless it’s a place of uthenera — eternal rest? We have to behave as people coming to pay respect to our elders.”

Zevran lowered himself before the altar to mentally recite the prayer he had read. He shot the party a smirk. “You know, I’m only getting on my knees for you.” When he rose, Carver took the jug and offered it to Alistair to sip. The doors then immediately opened.

“More sarcophagi,” Zevran noted.

A spirit of an elven boy ghosted in, then down the chamber, crying out for comfort.

Carver drew his sword.

“Uh....”

Carver went in and shoved the sarcophagi open.

Zevran’s confusion increased. “Umm....”

Skeletons and a revenant sprouted, zeroing in on the party. They quickly disposed of the threats.

Alistair spluttered. “What happened to paying respect!?”

Carver took out the last juggernaut piece for Sten’s set, straight-faced. “We’re respectfully making use of what the elderly have left behind. Besides, if a child died in fear here, then this place mustn’t only be



spiritually ancient, but haunted. We need to be as cautious and geared-up as possible.”

Sten suited up in full juggernaut armour, then turned the corner. “Dead end.”

Alistair shoved his helmet back on with a groan and turned back for another direction.

Much like the forest, the party stumbled across many unwanted obstacles, namely dead ends and ancient traps. Zevran eventually ran out of space for precious stones, while Alistair, in his full gear, fumbled an ancient phylactery and accidentally shattered it. Luckily, this was after the soul inside had given him knowledge of arcane warriors, and its gratitude for a long-awaited release. With the party now distinctly cautious, they eventually found their way to a flight of stairs descending for five stories. Behind the doors at the end of them was undoubtedly the deepest level of the ruins.

There, they also found Zathrian pacing.

“I worried why you were gone for so long,” the Keeper expressed by way of greeting. “Why have you yet slain Witherfang?”

“We’ve been *lost*,” Alistair curtly replied, him and the party removing their helmets. “Besides, we’ve heard claims that conflict with yours. We want the truth.”

“You’ve been *talking* to them?” Zathrian recoiled.

Before he could continue, Sten cut him off. “How did you know to find these stairs?”

Zathrian stammered under the full weight of qunari impatience. Alistair shoved the Keeper aside to open the door.

The Lady of the Forest greeted the party’s arrival without batting an eye. Contrastingly around her, werewolves growled and sylvans hunched down threateningly, even then just barely containing their massive sizes to the hollow basement.

The Lady placated those around her. “They come without bared weapons, see? The outsiders mean no harm.”

“Not yet,” Alistair added, stepping aside to reveal a shocked Zathrian. “The werewolves near you have attacked innocents. We would like to

at least hear why.”

“Swiftrunner has not told you?” The Lady’s lips thinned. “The werewolves here are innocents, too. We have together reached out to Zathrian for freedom from this curse, but he refuses to grant it.”

“Of course I do!” Zathrian lashed out, storming in. It spoke to his abilities that he wasn’t the slightest bit intimidated by the chamber’s occupants. “Humans are beasts by blood, and now they reflect their true nature!”

“Racist,” Zevran remarked.

Zathrian turned on the party. “I only speak of things seen. The first of these vermin had killed my son and violated my daughter. She had remained strong until she had learned of her pregnancy. Then the humans had committed their second murder!” His eyes turned pleading. “What could these monsters be called but evil? What balm is there for the horrors my children and I have suffered?”

Alistair stumbled back, shocked. He turned to the Lady, who nodded in confirmation. “When he had bound me to the wolf Witherfang, the curse had forced me into a rage that had seen to the humans’ deaths or infections. However, the werewolves of today have nothing to do with the crimes committed against your family, Zathrian. It is wrong to make them pay for their fathers’ sins.”

Alistair glanced back at the party, lost. When he met Carver’s eyes, he perked up, begging for assistance.

Carver reluctantly stepped forward, drawing the room’s attention. “Though I sympathise with both sides, you must answer to your actions alone. Zathrian, did I speak falsely of the curse’s connection to your long life?”

Zathrian waved his hand. “You did not, Warden.”

“I’m not—” Carver sighed sharply. Right, the party had been allowed into camp for Warden business. Correcting the assumption would work against them right now. “And did the Lady speak falsely of the current werewolves being innocent?”

Here, Zathrian stumbled. “Th-That—”

“The Dalish treasure children,” Carver continued. “They are pure and considered the clan’s future. What would your son and daughter think

of the suffering you have delivered to these people?”

The Keeper hesitated.

Carver delivered the final blow. “I ask you to seek the wisdom of your long years, Keeper. Release the curse, and finally rejoin your son and daughter. The humans you cure will help the Wardens end the blight, as our Rites demand. They will spend the rest of their lives protecting innocents, not hurting them.”

Zathrian clutched his staff, torn. For a long minute, he stared hard at nothing, before finally he slumped. “I have been an old man for a long time,” he confessed.

## Chapter End Notes

Another crazy old man has been humbled.

Also, how is the Warden able to read the elven stone tablet in the Brecilian Ruins, even when the Warden isn't Dalish? My answer is to make ancient elves able to imprint intention into their carvings. After all, the Warden just needs to simulate the tablet's prayer at the altar, not recite it. It's almost similar to the ancient elves storing memories into objects, like what the Inquisitor experiences in Trespasser.

As for Carver, my basis is that if a dwarf Warden can do it in the games, then Carver can too.

# Wolfsbane

Clan Siona was understandably crushed to learn the truth of Zathrian's longevity. As he shared the news, Carver wisely censored out the fact that the humans who had been cured of lycanthropy were currently leaving the forest through the Brecilian Passage. It was the only highway that cut through the Brecilian Forest, and primarily served to connect Gwaren with Denerim. Now Carver was sending the cured humans off down the road with a letter hastily written and signed by Alistair.

It ran along the lines of, "Found new recruits that were formerly cursed. They're good, now. Please be patient with them. You might have to teach them how to use a sword — or basic cutlery."

The letter was addressed to the only warden in Soldier's Peak:

*Faren.*

Hopefully, the witty dwarf and his castle of mages could also teach the humans literacy. Fingers crossed.

Lanaya sighed dejectedly. "Zathrian had always said I was ready to be Keeper, but with how long he had been around, I never imagined the day would come."

The crowd around them agreed mournfully, digesting what they had heard. Not a few were upset that the cured humans had been "set loose" to find their places in society. However, the clan reluctantly accepted that if the spirit of the forest had treasured the humans, then the humans perhaps deserved their freedom. The clan couldn't know that the humans were conscripted into the prestigious order of Grey Wardens. The Dalish were already focused on preparing to create a farewell aisle for one of their male members and his bondmate, the cured female werewolf whom Sten had converted. With the wrongs she had suffered, the clan had accepted when the elven couple had declared they were going to leave the clan to travel the world and make a home in Seheron.

"As Keeper," Lanaya continued, "I welcome you and the rest to participate in our farewell to Athras and Danyla. We understand you have helped them personally through this rough event."

"That's kind of you," Carver replied, "but responsibilities call us

elsewhere. Please extend our well wishes to them.”

Lanaya understood. “Once we recover our strength, Clan Siona will stand with the Wardens through this blight. Send for us from the Brecilian Forest, and we will answer.”

Carver gratefully inclined his head. “As for the cured humans,” he emphasised, “they will be starting new lives and interacting with others as humans for the first time. Their ancestry and their past lives as werewolves mustn’t leave this clan.”

“Children deserve a fresh start,” Lanaya conceded with several nods around them. “However, we Dalish have turned away many during this blight on the basis that we had been fighting an affliction. To fellow elves, we have revealed that it was lycanthropy being spread by werewolves. What, then, do we tell anyone who asks how we survived?”

Carver’s lips thinned. “Tell them...that we ended the werewolves.”

Lanaya’s eyes brightened with understanding. “Fen’halam,” she nodded gravely. “As you say, Wolfsbane.”

Er, what?

“Ser Carver!”

As the elves dispersed, the warden’s party turned to see Leliana and Solona hurrying over to them. Colour had notably returned to Solona’s cheeks, and the long staff strapped to her back didn’t appear to weigh her down. Solona was even wearing the quiver-like straps of a Circle mage’s staff sheath over her Grey Warden armour. However, like most rogues, Solona had only kept the chest, back, and shoulder pieces, protecting the rest of herself instead with chainmail over leather. While the boys were gone, the girls must have repaired her chainmail and negotiated with the Dalish for leather armour.

“You look better, Solona,” Carver greeted honestly.

The woman faltered, unsure what to do with her face. Smile? Solona was predictably plagued with survivor’s guilt, so the privileges of the living were foreign to her. She settled with a hesitant nod.

“I want to go kill darkspawn,” Solona demanded.

Behind Carver, Alistair choked. The crippingly shy mage had

obviously changed after the horrors she had experienced underground.

Leliana helpfully interpreted, “You boys were taking too long, so we went looking for you.”

“In the *living forest*?” Zevran emphasised.

“We found rare ironbark instead,” Solona continued. “When we came back without the four of you, the Keeper left to try his hand. In the meantime, the craftsman, Varathorn, made Leli a bow and breastplate.”

When crafted correctly, rare ironbark could be as tough as steel yet as flexible as wood. Leliana would never have to worry about a shattered bow.

Alistair gestured to the edge of the forest. “We have to meet up with Elissa and a few other allies in Redcliffe, first. Are you...*good* for Ostagar? I promise you there are plenty of darkspawn there.”

Solona firmly nodded, steel in her eyes. Beside her, Leliana hesitated, then agreed that Solona was ready.

Alistair sighed and headed out, Solona following. “Very well. Let me update you on what has happened so far....”

The rest of the party trailed after them, confirming they were packed up for a trip back. Zevran amusedly quirked his brow. “*Leli*?”

Leliana quietly huffed. “I’ve been speaking closely with Solo to help her heal. We’ve talked about many things we haven’t shared with anyone else. Nicknames are natural.”

“Defensive, are we?”

“She’s a nice girl!” Leliana returned, and meeped when Alistair and Solona glanced back at her raised voice. She stiffened her lip. “She’s a really nice girl.”

Sten grumbled while Carver lightly shoved Zevran. “They’ve only known each other for a few days. Don’t tease her.”

Leliana cocked a brow at the easy air between the boys. “It seems you’ve grown closer yourselves. Did Carver lower some of his walls?”

Carver whiplashed at Zevran and Sten’s traitorous nods.

“What do you mean they *left*?” Alistair spluttered.

Teagan scratched his head while the rest of the party fidgeted behind Alistair. Apparently, the mage warden recruits had escorted not only Avernus to Redcliffe, but Brother Weylon as well upon Elissa’s request. After curing Connor of his demon, Elissa had convinced Brother Weylon to allow her access to Brother Genitivi’s journal, from which she had deduced the possible location of the missing scholar and the Urn of Sacred Ashes. Elissa, Wynne, and Shale had then convinced themselves that they could cut down time from the blight by healing Arl Eamon while Alistair and the others were recruiting the Dalish.

Alistair turned to Carver. “What do you know of the Urn of Sacred Ashes?”

Carver blinked. “Why do you assume I know anything?”

“You know everything,” Alistair refuted. “You know what Duncan’s first and second action is in a situation. Reflecting on our journey so far, I suspect you know what *every member* in this party will do at any given moment. You *grimaced* when Elissa said she’d stay behind in Redcliffe, even if it was for her arm; you must have predicted she would do something like this!”

Shoot, had Carver not been as forgettable as he had been hoping? Were people really noticing the “lowly soldier” shadowing the wardens?

Still, Alistair was jumping to conclusions.

“I didn’t know she would leave for Haven,” Carver corrected, “but I’m not surprised. Warden Elissa was assigned a mission, and she’s going to see it through. We can only do what we have been doing, and help her complete it with our support.”

In Origins, a party member could receive thirteen different types of injuries and still be utilised in battle. While Carver refused to toe the shores of assumption that led to a god complex, he understood that in a timeline where Elissa and Alistair *were* the only wardens left in Ferelden, they wouldn’t have let a broken bone stop them from hunting down the archdemon.

Those who could be the Hero of Ferelden all shared this: they could be asked to create an army out of a few pieces of paper and utter

determination. They could be demanded the will to slay an archdemon, or die trying.

And they would answer.

Every candidate for the Hero of Ferelden had it in them the ability and the spirit to win. —No, what could they do *but* win. Fate was too small a word to capture what was simply the only natural result for the Warden. They *commanded* fate.

Ferelden would unite, and the archdemon would die.

Alistair crossed his arms thoughtfully. “You didn’t expect her to leave for the Urn of Sacred Ashes, which means...it actually exists?”

“I didn’t think she’d leave at all,” Carver deflected. “Brother Genitivi’s long absence from his study — and thus journal and disciple — suggests he has either lost his way or is being held up by external forces.”

Leliana recognised the scholar’s name. “Brother Genitivi is well-travelled, but we *are* in the middle of a blight. His last intended location was Haven. Should Elissa not have hurried to rescue him and the village from potential darkspawn?”

“Not without help,” Alistair commented, frowning at Teagan. “Even a warden wouldn’t attack a horde with only three people and a mabari.”

The bann intoned, “Redcliffe appreciates your help with Lord Connor, Warden. However, I haven’t the authority as de facto arl to send a portion of the Guerrin legion to the Frostback Mountains. The legion is still recovering from possession and is replacing those lost with new soldiers. Ser Perth and the few knights left are still training them.”

Alistair faced him fully. “Bann Teagan, you may not remember me. Last we met, I was decidedly muddier.”

Teagan paused, recognition dawning on him. “...Alistair?”

“The little boy you knew is willing to face the blight with a *stick* if he has to.” Alistair straightened. “I cherish Arl Eamon’s safety like anyone raised in Redcliffe, but even I see the risk in allowing darkspawn to settle in the arl’s domain. That is where Haven is, correct? I’m sure the people of Redcliffe would understand if part of the Guerrin legion left to protect other areas of the arl’s domain.”



“Haven isn’t a bannorn,” Teagan weakly defended. “It has no bann. How could it be part of an arling? Besides, *that* ensconced in the Frostbacks, it might as well sit on the borders of Ferelden and Orlais.”

“Lord Connor no longer needs to be monitored by his mother,” Carver stepped in. “Arlessa Isolde is free to take on burdens as the lawful *de facto* arl. Let’s hear her thoughts on this.”

Teagan dismissed the suggestion. “She wishes to care for Connor while she can, before the Circle must take him. I’ll not spoil her time.”

“She is an *arlessa*,” Carver deadpanned. “She deserves to be asked her opinion, first.”

Teagan had lost his sister, Ferelden’s queen, before, and it seemed in his haste to protect another woman in the Guerrin family, he was straying to patriarchal views on leadership. It didn’t help that Isolde herself had been conservatively raised like most women in Orlais. When the group met with Isolde in the main hall, she quietly listened to their crisis. The arlessa was moved by Carver’s opinion that Arl Eamon would have sent Elissa to Haven with back-up, before the revelation of Alistair’s presence distressed her.

“*You* would know what Eamon would do, yes?” Isolde accused. “You are his ‘proper Ferelden child’ after all. Teagan, are you not the current leader of Redcliffe? Why must I hear these trivialities?”

Alistair reeled back. “This has nothing to do with me! As warden, I implore you to send an infantry squad of the Guerrin legion to Haven, and help my counterpart and I clear it of darkspawn!”

Isolde held a hand up to her forehead, feeling faint. “If Teagan has denied your request, then denied it remains. Now leave.”

Carver exhaled sharply. “Bann Teagan’s position in Redcliffe is a result of unprecedented circumstances. However, by law, you are Arl Eamon’s successor while Lord Connor is too young for his responsibilities. History knows that you’re weakening the inheritance of your future children by passing off your duties like this.”

“Are you not a page?” Isolde narrowed her eyes. “What weight do you expect your opinion to have in Redcliffe Castle?”

Alistair recoiled, but Carver quickly held him back with a hand. “I respect Orlais. There is much to appreciate about its history. I’m merely lost on why a woman would hesitate to protect her family and

their future, when she is from the same country where a sixteen-year-old girl had impressively claimed her position as rightful empress, and still protects her people as their ruler today.”

Isolde’s expression shifted. From her perspective, a lowly Ferelden soldier who wasn’t even from Redcliffe was conveying admiration for her homeland. She likely hadn’t tried to hear her people’s opinions of her, too scared to have her personal fears confirmed. Now, tentative bravery lit up within her.

She straightened. “I declared it once, and again I say: the one who delivers the Sacred Ashes of Our Lady will have the esteem of Redcliffe, and all the riches it is in my power to grant. Ser,” she gestured to a soldier guarding the main hall’s doors, “summon Sergeant Jory. I shall bestow him sixty soldiers and send him with the Wardens to Haven. It’s time to protect our arling and cure my husband.”

Near the castle’s training grounds and away from Teagan and Isolde, the party collected themselves.

Sten turned to Carver. “There are no darkspawn in Haven.”

Heads turned in his direction, and Carver sighed. Trust the qunari to read his subtle body language. “There might be, but they aren’t the external forces I suspect are troubling Brother Genitivi. Darkspawn are drawn to populated areas, and the Frostbacks aren’t exactly a vacation spot.”

Alistair perked up. “So Elissa and the rest aren’t in danger? Are they and Brother Genitivi being harrassed by random dwarven merchants?”

Carver shook his head. “That far removed from society, the people of Haven are intentionally avoiding human contact.”

“Ah,” Zevran hummed delightfully. “Now we’re entering the realm of conspiracies. I do so love causing them.”

“Regardless of who or what is in Haven,” Carver moved on, “you must be ready. If even a false Urn of Sacred Ashes is in Haven, you can predict how such people would react to outsiders.”

The party noticed his wording. “You’re not coming?”

“I must update Teyrn Loghain on our progress,” Carver admitted. “I’ve sent him letters from developed locations we’ve passed through, but

sensitive information requires care. I've only met one fellow member of Maric's Shield through whom I can safely correspond with Ostagar."

Leliana blinked. "You have? Who?"

"It was a long time ago," Carver deflected, "in Lothering."

Solona crossed her arms. "If no darkspawn await us in Haven, then I'm departing for Ostagar. The more wardens in the front line, the better."

Leliana agreed. "I'm going with her."

Alistair ran a hand through his hair. "Then it seems we have no choice but to split up. Half of us will go to Ostagar, while the other half will catch up with Elissa and the rest. Solona, don't enter the battlefield without Duncan's permission. I say this as your senior. After delivering your intel, Carver, I assume you will follow?" At Solona's reluctant murmur and Carver's nod, Alistair sighed. "Alright then. Maker be with us all."

X

Giggles arose from behind Carver. Not for the first time, he ignored it. Solona and Leliana were content to trail after Carver in hushed conversation as the small party travelled east down a merchant route connecting Redcliffe with Lothering. While Leliana was most likely the only source of laughter in the group, Carver had glanced back once to catch Solona's lips curled into something that could be called a smile. It seemed that talking about shoes with Leliana helped remind Solona what it felt like to be human.

He was surprised to hear the two trudge up to his side.

"How is it?" Solona gestured to Carver's hip.

He fixed the sheathed Summer Sword. "Surprisingly light. Unwieldy. I'm still getting used to it."

"It's almost as long as you are tall," Leliana acknowledged, "and you are a very tall child."

Carver blinked. "I'm eighteen."

Leliana stared, and Solona stifled what suspiciously resembled a

laugh. “I see. You have a very youthful face, Carver. It will benefit you in the long run.”

Solona laid a hand on Carver’s pauldron. “Especially if you wear clothes with less sleeves.”

Carver slowly crossed his arms over himself. “I’m sensing a strange shift.”

Solona suffered another muted cough while Leliana freely giggled. “Still, you’re adjusting to Summer Sword very well. When do you think you’ll be able to wield it properly?”

“I don’t know,” Carver exhaled frustratedly.

The king’s army mainly taught their soldiers how to wield a longsword or a knightly sword, and a longbow. Since Orlais’ days as a global empire, the size of a country’s mounted infantry had made or broke a war. However, Loghain and his Night Elves unit had changed the game when they had proven that archery could be applied to more than covert missions. By equipping an infantry squad with longbows — a weapon normally only used by the Dalish — an army of chevaliers could be downed by a hail of arrows before they could even cross the battlefield. Ferelden had since adopted this mindset and required a soldier to know archery before they could be knighted. This prerequisite had given Carver the basic skills to employ a shortbow against werewolves, though he undoubtedly fell short to Leliana’s level of skill.

As for swords, the king’s army couldn’t afford to equip its members with anything larger than a longsword. Like plate armour, greatswords required large ores and proportionally large furnaces, and Ferelden’s industrial zones had suffered from the rebellion. To keep up with Thedas’s modern-day weaponry, Ferelden had opted to prioritise producing armour over large weapons. Otherwise, one swing from an Orlesian blade could bash a soldier’s head in before the soldier could make their first cut. This was why Summer Sword, which was already the greatest blade produced in modern Orlesian history, was such a prized weapon in Ferelden. After defeating its original wielder, Loghain had generously handed the sword over to Ser Cauthrien with the claim that he was more inclined towards archery and knightly swords anyway.

Like any greatsword, Summer Sword was basically a sword-shaped polearm. It was *huge*. The sword’s fine metals already gave it a

lightness comparable to a wooden spear, rescuing Carver from weakly dragging the long thing around. However, this meant he wouldn't be able to transfer his habits over to other greatswords. If he wasn't in the middle of a blight, he would have preferred to learn how to wield a greatsword properly.

As it was, he was asking Sten for pointers.

Qunari smiths crafted their weaponry to an already admirable lightness, hence the going price for qunari steel in the black market. This, combined with Sten's monstrous strength, turned Asala into a hammer *and* a shredder. Carver wasn't the only party member to be glad that he was on their side. However, Carver lacked Sten's might. Where Sten could wield his sword like a wrecking ball, Carver had to wield his like a surgeon.

In fact, the Qunari apparently favoured high impact infantry warfare. The way Sten described it, the Antaam required its members to be adept with uniquely strong yet light javelins crafted by their smiths, which they called "pilum." On the battlefield, an army of qunari would throw their pilum at an enemy then charge. Additionally, since the qunari painted themselves with vitaar instead of donning plate armour, they could move faster than their enemies and blitz them. Off the battlefield, the same pilum could be used to build emergency defences or carry heavy equipment. The Qun focused on utilising as much of an object or individual's purpose as possible in respect for its existence.

It was almost beautiful, if it wasn't also downright terrifying.

So.

Was Carver adjusting to Summer Sword? Yes.

Was he wielding it *properly*? The only way to find out was to fight another greatsword wielder.

...He never wished to find out.

"How about you?" Carver turned to Solona. "That isn't your staff from the Circle, is it?"

Solona shook her head. "This was another warden's, Richu's. She was one of the last to survive, and fought off darkspawn while I escaped."

Though Carver belatedly feared his question had been callous, Solona

seemed eager to speak of her comrades, her *sisters*, from underground. She probably wished to share of the bravery she had experienced from them.

Solona's lips quirked. "She was the funniest person I knew. In the dark where we could barely see anything, she could make laughter sprout from everywhere. She claimed that the Dalish performed monthly orgies under the full moon to dissuade demons from haunting them. We liked to imagine that we were all Dalish going through just another ceremony. That it was merely dark because clouds were covering the moon."

Guilt and grief strangled Carver's throat, and he struggled to not react. A hum from Leliana encouraged Solona to continue.

Luckily, Solona's attention was mainly on the road ahead of them. "Some of us asked her how the Dalish conceal their Fade-touched members from Templars. She said the clans pretend that they don't have anyone like that. *We're ignorant nomads, how can anyone special come from us? Oh, that? It's just a longbow or a shepherd's crook. We have to hunt and care for small flocks, you know.* Maker, she was hilarious."

There was likely truth to her words, else a certain archer in the Bull's Chargers was an outlier.

"I'm getting used to her staff," Solona continued, adjusting her straps. "Especially the hooked part. At the very least, I can catch a sheep if I need to. Leliana tells me you're a farmer's boy?"

Carver blinked, refocusing. "I was, but my family were farmers by the simplest meaning of the word. Lothering's animals were only handled by ranchers." He hesitated. "You know, you can ask me about myself anytime. We *are* cousins."

Solona glanced at him, eyes lighting up. "I remember, now. You were at Ostagar. Your mother is also an Amell, right?" She bit her lip. "How is your family, with the blight and all...?"

Leliana perked up as well, though Carver shrugged. "They left Lothering before the blight, but I'm not sure if they've completely escaped the war, or where they are now. I hope Kirkwall."

"Or Rivain," Solona earnestly said. "I understand my family left for my father's homeland after I was taken to the Circle. I'm sure my family would have welcomed yours."

Solona and Leliana took advantage of a lull in the conversation to trade expressive looks. Carver pretended obliviousness, unsure how to feel, before finally speeding up to the front of the group again.

A giggle arose behind him.

Great. The girls had developed silent communication and inside jokes. If Carver had to be reminded of his emotional constipation and single status in exchange for Solona's mental health, he was happy to make the sacrifice. He just wished he knew how to behave without outwardly displaying his awkwardness.

"So Carver," Leliana projected. Ah, was he back in the conversation? "You didn't ask about my family."

Carver glanced back. "Is it alright if I ask?"

"No need," Leliana smirked. Oh no. "You already know my background, don't you? Just like you know everyone else's."

Where was this assumption coming from!?

"I can't predict anything," Carver stressed, "and I don't know everything. I operate mostly on instinct."

Leliana murmured teasingly to Solona, then raised her voice. "You close your hand when you lie, dear Carver."

Carver sped up until he was barely within hearing distance of the girls. Darn bard. Carver self-consciously looked down at his hands, clenching and unclenching them. Should he occupy them with something when he intended to lie? He grasped his sword just as a raven landed on his shoulder.

Right, *her*. On the way out of Redcliffe Castle's gates, the avian had descended from where she had probably been hiding from Shale, and landed on Solona's crook. Since then, the bird had been flying ahead of them or riding on someone's shoulder. She appeared content tailing at least *one* warden. At the very least, she was the only conversation companion Carver wanted around right now.

He wasn't socially awkward. He *wasn't*.

## Cousin

Eventually the party made camp, then started a new day following the same formation with a considerable distance between Carver and the flirting girls behind him. He morosely fixed the rucksack over his shoulder, careful not to upset the raven hitching a ride on it. Even before the blight, merchants rarely frequented the current road, opting instead to cross Lake Calenhad by boat to hit the more prosperous primary destinations. Now, the party's best bet for finding horses to expedite their journey was Lothering, through which the king's army was pushing resources to resupply the front line while also fending off darkspawn. By now, the requisitions officer must have established a depot for horses.

*Plink!*

Carver staggered as an arrow grazed his armour, sticking into the ground behind him. The raven flew off him with an affronted squawk, drawing his eyes to the blinding sun. Pinprick shadows formed ahead of him.

*"Archers!"* Carver cried out, and bolted for the wooded side of the road with a shove of his helmet on.

A rain of arrows fell on the road, several of them striking Carver's armour and nearly knocking him over. He slid down a ditch for cover behind a tree with a wince, struggling to remember how to breathe. A weak tug at an arrow lodged in his breastplate eventually removed it. Luckily Carver had immediately turned sideways against the arrows to make himself a smaller target, so that the other arrows had only been glancing blows.

When the volley ended, a crowd of Howe soldiers crept out of the dawn's light, taunting. Despite their conduct, Carver had to credit their training. They had attacked with the sun behind them when they could, and softened their targets with arrows first.

*"Arl Rendon learned about you, little bird,"* a Howe soldier called out, searching for Carver. *"You were the runner who had warned Teyrn Bryce of our attack. You delivered Teyrn Fergus's crest to the Cousland servants in Denerim, regrouping Highever's forces. Our arl and the entire legion are on the run because of you!"*

Carver peeked around his cover and quickly retreated his head. The



Howe soldiers had noticed his helmet immediately and were now zeroing in on him with nocked arrows and drawn swords. Carver hastily checked his breastplate.

Shoot.

The arrow had pierced his armour, chainmail, and had finally stopped at his leather padding. This was exactly what a full suit of armour was designed for. However, the resultant bruising *hurt*. If Carver wasn't high on adrenaline, he was sure he would have also been suffering from the pain of a fractured rib. He couldn't blindly rely on his breastplate to protect him anymore.

Carver delicately removed his shortbow from its makeshift cloth sling. Despite his training, he had kept it strung in case he would need it on the fly, especially in the middle of a blight. Regardless, a sense of futility set in as he carefully nocked an arrow. He couldn't possibly take a squad of soldiers on his own. He could only hope that Leliana and Solona had been far away enough to dodge the arrows and flee for cover.

A Howe soldier sneered. "Looks like you're all alone, Postboy."

Carver grit his teeth. "*Morrigan*."

"I don't care *what* your name is——*ugyaah!*"

A giant spider suddenly dropped from the sky on the Howe soldiers and spewed poison at them. The formation of soldiers scattered as the spider webbed runaways and feasted on others. Carver fired arrows at those who ran a comfortable distance away from Morrigan before his modest quiver finally ran out. When it did, he left his cover for the open road and unsheathed Summer Sword.

He knew he physically couldn't swing it.

Ahead of him, the spider rose on its hind appendages straight up, then straighter, until its slender limbs and torso melted into the silhouette of a woman. She lowered outstretched arms with a grunt, then flicked two golden globes down at the quivering flesh below her with disinterest. A pale thumb wiped her lips of blood.

"I am not overly fond of the taste of pudgy old men."

Carver deadpanned. "Apologies. I will offer a fair maiden next time — like that one."

The soldier at the end of Carver's finger shrieked and fled.

—Before a cone of fire shot past Carver and Morrigan, scorching her. An arrow followed up to down the last soldier trying to escape.

Solona and Leliana caught up to them, panting. “What was *that*? Why would an army attack us!?”

“The Howe legion,” Carver corrected, sheathing Summer Sword. “Arl Rendon has beef with the Couslands. I happened to run a few messages for them.”

“We heard,” Solona shared, looking at the corpses around them. “Still, they behaved no better than bandits! How can they cause problems like this while their peers are all down south fighting darkspawn?”

Carver shook his head, equally lost. Arl Rendon's son Thomas was still in Ostagar with the main Howe legion. It was difficult to imagine that the arl would sabotage his favourite son's survival by allowing his soldiers to prey on merchants travelling to Lothering.

Unless Thomas Howe had passed away on the front line.

*Maker*, it made sense. Rendon Howe was upset at learning of Thomas's death at Ostagar. The arl hadn't taken the blight seriously, and had taken advantage of it to grab power while most of Ferelden's important figures had been away. Now the arl was too far deep in his grief to stop the wheel of violence he had started. Carver needed to hurry his plans in the northern coast of Ferelden.

“Anyway,” Solona's gaze strayed, “we meet again, Morrigan.”

Carver glanced at the witch, who stood with crossed arms. Right, the two ladies had met in Solona's first mission as a warden recruit.

“This is Morrigan,” Solona introduced to the party, “a witch of the wilds. Though...you already seem to know that, Carver.”

Luckily, he was already resting his dominant hand on his sword hilt. “Heard about her from Warden Alistair. I grew suspicious when a bird started following us out of Ostagar.”

“This is unexpectedly good fortune,” Solona decided as she moved to loot the dead of useful items. “Now we have a larger party. Bandits will know better than to attack us.”

Leliana, more suspicious of humans than Solona, frowned. “For what reason would this woman follow us around?”

Morrigan scoffed. “*This woman* is right here, bard.”

“I’m curious myself,” Solona added.

Morrigan pointedly didn’t help the party clear the road. “‘Tis a pain, but Mother *insists* I supervise the wardens hunting the archdemon. Do not ask why.” The last statement wasn’t from ignorance, but because Morrigan knew the reason and didn’t wish to share.

Solona blinked. “We’re not hunting the archdemon.”

Morrigan jut her chin to Carver. “No, but *he* is, and he is far more tolerable company than most of the rest.”

Carver winced as he moved, ignoring the comment to focus on Solona’s words. “A party of four isn’t exactly a step up from three.”

Leliana noticed. “Sit down, Carver.”

It spoke to his pain that he obliged and slumped on the side of the road. The party drew close as Leliana helped him out of his gauntlets, vambrace, pauldron, rerebrace, couter, cuirass, then finally plackart. The damaged chainmail came off, and lastly the leather armour. A gentle hand lifted Carver’s tunic to reveal a bruise the size of a fist on his ribs.

“Fractured,” Leliana confirmed.

The warden’s entire squad had actually been lucky to not suffer any injuries up until Elissa’s broken arm. They were testing the balance of probability by not expecting any more.

Solona knelt down to apply healing magic, and suddenly the pain vanished with the bruise. Carver experimentally twisted his torso, and Solona looked up at him. “Where else were you hit?”

Carver gestured, bewildered. “You healed the bone. Even Senior Enchanter Wynne can’t do that.”

“She’s probably not a spirit healer,” Solona shared, healing bruises under even armour. Contact was apparently not necessary. “And if she is, the benevolent spirit in her body is probably focused on maintaining her strength, considering her age.”

Carver twitched. “Explain spirit healing, exactly.”

Solona stood up, finished. “I discovered how to do it underground. To perform spirit healing, I allow a benevolent spirit from the Fade to enter my body and coexist with me. Once I’m done healing, I dismiss the spirit.”

“You seek vengeance against darkspawn.”

Solona blinked at Carver’s non sequitur. “And?”

Carver forcibly subdued his panic. “That desire might end up tainting the spirit, turning it into a demon. For your sake, I pray you consider moving past that desire.”

Solona’s steel blue eyes narrowed. “You sound like a Templar.”

Carver stood up placatingly. “I’m just worried about you. I’ve seen it before.”

“Where?” Solona demanded, temper rising. “With who?”

Carver bit his lip.

“I can’t believe this!” Solona’s voice cracked. “You’re Ser Cauthrien’s favourite — you’re my *family*! How can you turn against me and speak as if I’d turn into an abomination!?”

She pivoted away, and Carver called out after her. “Solona, I’m sorry I made you feel that way!”

It was probably a bad time to ask if she still had a spirit inside of her. Hopefully her anger wouldn’t affect the entity.

Carver slumped back down on the road, rubbing his eyes. “I’m good, Leliana — go check on her, please. She shouldn’t travel alone.”

The redhead hesitantly nodded and ran after Solona. Morrigan watched Carver put his armour back on himself. “You know little of mages,” she commented.

Carver couldn’t find a response to that. Even when surrounded by them, he apparently didn’t know how to act.

X

“Ser,” Basket greeted.

Carver waved, permitting Basket to relax from a salute. "It's late, Sergeant. My party and I are just here for tonight, then we're departing for Ostagar come dawn."

Basket and the few soldiers up at this hour glanced past him to see three examples of beauty, then looked back at him. With his helmet damaged from the ambush, Carver was forced to display his face.

Carver deadpanned. "We're with *her*." He pointed at Morrigan.

The coldly stunning woman wasn't even paying the soldiers any attention, boredly staring instead at Lothering's tavern turned subsidiary of the king's army. Next to her was the ethereal Solona, and further over was the rosy-cheeked Leliana.

The soldiers nodded in understanding.

As they showed the girls to a room for the night, Carver pulled Basket aside. "Has Ser Rhiannon asked you for anything?"

Basket shrugged. "We run letters to Ser Nigel for her. If she has needed anything else from Lothering, she hasn't written to me personally yet. Should I expect something, ser?"

"Remnants of the Howe legion have turned into highwaymen," Carver shared. "They're hunting around Lothering, but I can't be sure they're only in that area. Strengthen patrols around here and see if you can capture some of them. It may prove fruitful in narrowing down Arl Rendon's location."

"I heard about that," Basket confessed. "Nasty timing for a conflict between great names. We all should have seen it coming, though, given what they say about Arl Rendon. His son, may Lord Thomas rest in peace, was unfortunately a clone of his father. At least he was the youngest of Arl Rendon's children. Never stood a chance inheriting Amaranthine."

"Arl Rendon is crueller than his public image," Carver corrected. "He would have found a way to pass his arling off to Lord Thomas."

Basket choked. "Maker, he hates his other children that much?"

"They resemble his late wife greatly," Carver shared.

"Lady Eliane...?" Basket murmured to himself, pondering.

Carver left the sergeant with the piece of gossip and climbed the tavern's stairs for a room. If more people grew aware of Nathaniel and Delilah Howe's truly innocent natures, the better it would be for Amaranthine in the long run. Carver washed himself and eventually found his party's room, a cramped space with two bunk beds flushed against the walls. Carver claimed the last vacant spot and nearly fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. He was distantly aware of the quiet chatter in the room silencing upon his arrival, then picking up again as he settled.

"So he never trained to be a Templar?" Solona's voice faintly travelled through the room.

Leliana hummed a confirmation. "Although he picked up some abilities from Alistair. Apparently, he's a fast learner."

"Why not?" Solona grumbled. "He's motivated for promotion. Might as well be a little genius while he's at it."

"He speaks counter to the way of Templars," Morrigan whispered. "I would know. I have killed many a holy knight."

Solona sharply exhaled. "You heard him back there."

"Indeed," Morrigan confirmed, "and further back still, when you were yet a stranger among the Dalish. The boy expresses a deeper awareness of the Fade than you have with your books and unsuspicious instinct."

"You speak of Soldier's Peak," Leliana caught on.

"And more." Morrigan shifted in her bunk. "I'll not pretend I understand the meaning of all this...touching...people of society engage in. However, Carver's body language speaks well enough to other animals. Particularly cornered ones."

Solona's voice tensed. "I'm not an *abomination*."

"He has always been cornered," Morrigan dismissed. "By what, I cannot say. He is at least unsurprised by your quick rejection of him. Frankly, you exercise a great risk of turning the spirits you contact into demons. Your careless conduct is far removed from the necessary mindset to stand at the top of the food chain."

Solona's voice broke. "Why...?"

“Your cousin said so, did he not?” Morrigan huffed. “You allow vengeance to become you. Even within yourself, you are not the master. Such creatures live brightly then quickly snuff out like a beautiful flame.”

To her credit, Solona took the hits. “...Teach me.”

“Pardon?”

“I want to be at the top of the food chain,” Solona decided. “You are headstrong and ungentle, Morrigan. Unlike the teachers in the Circle, you haven’t dissuaded me from strong feelings such as vengeance. You know a way to become the master of oneself. I refuse to bow to external forces ever again.”

Morrigan hummed. “You have eyes, Solona, and a flattering tongue. Very well, I may impart the wisdom of the wilds to you, should you be open-minded....”

X

The four of them rode into an Ostagar more solemn yet faster-paced than the last that Carver had been there. A squire accepted their horses into a stable built into Ostagar’s northern face, while an elven servant escorted them to the newly-positioned war table hidden in a ruined alcove. Oiled animal skins shielded the table from the elements and prying eyes. Since the last great clash in Ostagar, the king’s army had apparently learned to set up camp in the surface-level bones of Ostagar’s fortress to beware underground and airborne intruders. Based on the numerous soldiers clad in tarp and armour napping around the camp, a night shift had also been established for patrol.

It was a far cry from the hastily-pitched camp where Carver had had to *search* for the commanding officers he had needed.

In the new war tent, Carver and his party found Duncan tending to his splinted ankle. He perked up at the sight of them.

“Ser Carver,” Duncan nodded in accordance with rank, before his eyes softened. “Solona.”

“I require permission to fight on the front lines,” Solona surged forward, faltering before Duncan’s kindness. “Since we saw each other last, Warden-Commander, I have...experienced much.”

“I shall hear of it,” Duncan gently encouraged.

At the same time, the legion commanders in the war tent straightened up at Carver's name. One in particular shoved his way to the war tent's flaps. "Postboy!" Nails breathed.

Carver parted from Solona and Duncan to allow them a semblance of privacy. Morrigan and Leliana hung aside from the flaps, avoiding foot traffic. The effort was unnecessary as Nails locked his arm around Carver's neck and dragged him over to the royal legion's corner of the tent. Carver already missed owning a proper helmet.

"Ser Rhiannon is asking *me* for directions," Nails hissed. He shot a glare over his shoulder, and the war tent resumed its bustle of activity. He released Carver enough to allow a face-to-face interaction, but it was obvious to anyone with two brain cells that Nails was embracing Carver to keep him in *one place*. "Basket, as well, and other top brass. *Why* is everyone coming to me for instruction?"

Carver was relieved to note that no one was watching the two of them. He preferred hiding in someone's shadow. "Well, you're in charge."

"You *put* me in charge!" Nails hissed. "Or did you not liberally interpret Teyrn Loghain's orders before the great clash?"

"You were the obvious choice," Carver returned. "Speaking of, Ser Cauthrien...."

Nails gripped Carver's arm before he could fully unsheathe the Summer Sword. "Stop. I'll hear of it *after* the blight. How many other figures in Ferelden have their power because of you? Honestly, you...." The captain of the royal legion paled and ran a hand through his hair. "You're frustratingly dense, you know that? *Volunteering* to hunt down the archdemon! What are you on?"

It didn't matter that Carver hadn't volunteered. He had accepted Loghain's orders regardless.

"Maker's breath, Postboy," Nails exhaled sharply. "Do you have anything else in your head? We soldiers joke about you and the mail, but you must have *some* sense of caution."

Carver peered at his captain, lost on the man's point. "The king requires archdemon blood. Of course I'll follow Teyrn Loghain's command."

Nails swallowed thickly, and Carver slowly realised that more than



irritation coloured his captain's voice. "You were there," Nails quieted. "In the clash. The archdemon had felled the tower over the mages' vanguard, *right* where you had been. Bride of the Maker, you don't get it. *No one sane* seeks out an archdemon after experiencing that. Carver...are you alright?"

Compartmentalization. It was someone else's first instinct. "I'm fine."

Nails scanned Carver's face for a moment before reluctantly sighing. "I actually believe you, and I *know* you're lying to my face. Ha. Someone showed you your tells."

Carver loosened his grip of Summer Sword.

"You're here for Teyrn Loghain," Nails deduced, jerking his head towards the alcove side of the tent. "Our commander's lucky. There's a line for you."

When Nails released Carver and stepped aside, Carver hesitantly picked his way across the tent for Loghain and the king. He was waylaid yet again before he could reach his intended target.

"Carver," Theron caught.

Carver blinked, slowing to a halt. "Warden Theron."

"You're busy," Theron realised, flustered. "Of course you are. I saw you and...."

Carver waited for more, but the elf continued to silently struggle with something. Carver patted him on the shoulder. "You have survived much, from the taint to the clashes up to now, and for that take heart. Few possess the same determination."

"Aye," a passing noble readily shared. "The Champion of Ostagar is even healing the king, long may he live!"

The declaration rippled out of the tent, easily repeated. The nobles in the war tent moved around Theron without pause at his ears or vallaslin. One of the passing commanders patted Theron on the back, and the quiet elf accepted the gesture with confident ease.

Carver's brows rose. "Champion?"

Theron's confidence suddenly evaporated. "If you were on the front lines too, I'm sure...! And I...I tried to explain to the dragon king that

you weren't a warden...!"

"Peace," Carver placated. "I prefer not drawing attention, and I never expect you to concern yourself otherwise. This is merely a pleasant surprise." A hero wasn't defined by capital letters, or even the exact term "hero." "I'm happy for you."

Theron struggled for words again. "While I swim afloat of the world's changes, I see that you remain the same."

Theron spoke the last phrase with a Dalish intonation that reminded Carver of the weight behind "seeing" others. A result of his accent? Honestly, there was little to see in Carver beyond an unsociable rock.

Carver scratched his head awkwardly. "You're a fast learner."

"Again, I misstep," Theron commented, reaching beyond his own comfort zone. "The Ash Warriors say I speak too quickly, like one who rarely communicates with one's tongue."

"You were a halla breeder," Carver offered.

Theron shook his head. "You have not changed, Carver. Still you are pleasant company."

As in, a silent person?

No, Morrigan spoke of *animals*, and Theron was....

Theron was....

Carver's grip on his mental boxes slipped. Where was his posture faulty? In what way was he not keeping to himself, out of the way, speaking up only where faceless help was needed? Had he brushed his hair improperly this morning, dulled his armour too little, met others' gazes too frequently? He didn't want to be memorable, he just didn't want the people around him to suffer or die. He was merely one impetus of many towards a certain conclusion.

Theron placed a hand on Carver's shoulder, practised yet awkward upon a human target. "Seeing you alive gladdens my heart, Carver. I pray you feel as I do."

He turned to address a cluster of commanders that had gathered nearby, fully-armoured and attentive. It was time for Theron to lead another skirmish against darkspawn. Carver patted the hand on his

shoulder in mutual farewell before continuing on his path for Loghain.

Only a few minutes back in Ostagar, and Carver was already overwhelmed. Then again, he rarely returned to a place where he had participated in a major event - though he had only been one of many soldiers present....

“Teyrn Loghain,” Carver finally reached, only to be cut off.

“Ah, Carver,” Loghain straightened from over the war table. Next to him, a pale Cailan leaned off the table as if on cue and gestured for Duncan. “Finally. This shouldn’t suffer further delay.”

Carver found himself swept up with Loghain, Cailan, and Duncan leaving the tent for the western portcullis of Ostagar’s fortress. His bewilderment grew as an escort of soldiers wordlessly fell in line behind them and rose the portcullis, allowing them passage through the fortress’s walls. Beyond the gate were countless rows of brilliantly armoured figures and steeds blanketing Ferelden’s wild landscape. Cailan led his retinue to a mounted individual with as much distance between himself and his army, as the distance that grew between Cailan and the escort of soldiers who stood back at attention.

The significant stranger dismounted and removed his feathered helmet, greeting Cailan with a raised chin. “So quick to receive the Wardens into your Line,” the man drawled, “yet not so a proper military.”

“Your Majesty,” Loghain tacked on pointedly.

The stranger chuckled. “*Your Grace* will do.”

Cailan relaxed his posture, likely in no small part due to his ongoing affliction. “The southern line began with a proper military,” he helpfully shared. “Coordinating the Wardens, both Ferelden and Orlais, with it is merely a matter of course in a blight. Right, Duncan?”

Next to him, Duncan nodded. Though he stood with a crutch, the weathered griffon across his chest was unmistakable. “Warden-Commander Alisse has accepted my lead while the blight is restricted to Ferelden.”

The stranger cocked his brow. “You mean to say that Ferelden doesn’t need help against a global threat?”

Duncan didn't deny it, but Loghain quickly huffed. "*Expected* help, certainly."

"I am the Head-Commander of Orlais' chevaliers," the man intoned, revealing himself to Carver as Gaspard de Chalons. "It is no surprise that my cousin sent me with her army."

Loghain looked over his shoulder to the lone individual directly behind him, Cailan, and Duncan. Carver minutely shook his head.

Loghain's passionate tone cooled. "Indeed," he turned and held out a hand, "a good soldier respects the written command of their superiors. Well?"

Gaspard, having reached for his hand to shake it, floundered. "Written command?" he parroted.

"A slip of parchment," Loghain explained, "marked with ink, and sealed with wax."

"I am *familiar* with paperwork," Gaspard tensed. "I am *Orlesian*."

"I am well aware," Loghain drawled. "Commander Gaspard, don't tell me you have misplaced your superior's orders?"

Gaspard bit the inside of his cheek. His proper title was Grand Duke or Head-Commander, and he was being reduced to a common soldier. "I have said no such thing."

"Then you'll have to speak simply for us dog lords to understand."

Gaspard's eyes turned flinty. "The empress implicitly trusts me in many matters as her cousin and Head-Commander."

Cailan chimed in. "I don't see how that matters here. I am not the empress."

Duncan calmly interceded, raising his hands between both sides. "Perhaps you should return with the empress's seal, Grand Duke."

Gaspard stared hard at the three of them. The chevalier eventually inclined his head, pivoted, and stalked back to his men.

"Nique ta race," the Orlesian muttered.

"Le vôtre d'abord," Loghain returned.

Gaspard whirled around.

Loghain cocked a brow. "It is the nature of servants to learn their master's tongue. Unfortunate, that the Usurper never deigned to notice to the end."

Cailan led his retinue and soldiers back into the fortress, not waiting to watch Orlais' chevaliers ripple with reversed movement. Loghain flicked two fingers, and Carver caught up to walk in line with them.

"...What did Satin *tell* you?" Carver burst, quickly adding, "Teyrn."

"You told him yourself," Loghain pointed out. "The entities in Jader would be no issue."

"And they weren't," Cailan easily continued.

"Surprisingly," Duncan evenly stated. "I am familiar with the Grey Warden order, but not the intricacies of the chevalier cavalry. Your tone, Your Majesty, might have forever discouraged Orlesian support."

"They'll be back." Cailan turned as they entered the war tent. "Right, ser knight?"

"...Give it ten years," Carver relented.

Cailan laughed, stumbling with sudden faintness. "That's why Loghain wanted to wait for your arrival, I see."

Loghain swiftly helped Cailan into a cot obviously parked there for the tainted king. "Sit now, Cailan. Carver, report."

Carver glanced back at Duncan returning to his own chair where Solona awaited, healing passing commanders' wounds with Morrigan and Leliana's help. Solona straightened at Duncan's arrival and found a private space to continue her briefing. Carver exhaled and followed Loghain to the least crowded corner of the war tent.

"I have received your monthly reports," Loghain lowered his voice. "You spoke of imparting sensitive information to me in person last you wrote. That was a week ago."

Carver winced. "And the chevaliers...?"

"Had waited a week," Loghain confirmed. "Surely what transpired a moment ago could have been performed by Satin. Unless you had meant to do more than stand and shake your head."

Carver internally spluttered. Loghain had expected Carver to speak to Gaspard *himself*? No — Carver had somehow *implied* he would!?

He hadn't expected that the chevaliers would be allowed past Ferelden's borders all the way to Ostagar, and it was a massive coincidence their arrival had coincided with Carver's last letter. What could Carver say beyond that he had gotten lost in the Brecilian Forest? He might as well turn in his resignation letter and lose the abilities he had been earning to steer history towards a less dark direction. Like Alistair, Loghain was leaping to conclusions about Carver based on circumstance.

So, like a liar, Carver fibbed.

"With approval from Warden-Commander Duncan, Warden Solona's assistance with the Line will prove more useful than chevaliers," Carver murmured. "However, I couldn't ascertain the Warden-Commander's inclination without witnessing him interact with Warden Solona in Ostagar. If he had behaved counter to my expectations upon Solona's arrival, then regardless of past history, King Cailan would have had to admit Head-Commander Gaspard into our military."

Loghain dryly glanced at Solona, and then at Leliana and Morrigan past her. "More useful, you say."

"By your word, a healer is worth a hundred warriors," Carver pointed out. Or in this case, thousands of chevaliers. "Furthermore, the taint can evidently be countered by magical cures. Incorporate Warden Solona with Warden Theron and the Ash Warriors, and perhaps we may gain a deeper understanding of the blight as a whole."

While the Mabari Madness tonic obviously applied to those with a magical ancestry, it was possible that a weaker effect could be found in those with a current touch of the Fade, like living mages. Given that mothers and sisters of the Chantry had been kidnapped by the darkspawn, and that Wynne hadn't been the only loyal mage to chase the darkspawn to Lothering, the king's army would greatly benefit from keeping the healers they had left. Since the taint was a terminal illness, it was easy to imagine that there would be volunteers for testing the tonic.

On the other hand, the idea was a stretch born from Carver's improvisation.

"Regardless," Carver continued, "history has proven that war

engenders scientific advancement. Any insight that Warden Solona's talents may reveal in the general field of medicine can only help Ferelden in the long run."

Loghain's gaze was unreadable. "You trust the warden this greatly?"

"Her abilities," Carver allowed, "and her devotion against the blight." He couldn't say what Solona might resort to if she thought humanity's efforts were inadequate. Carver didn't want to imagine the wilds going up in literal flames.

Loghain frowned. "You said the same of the other wardens I sent you with."

Clearly, they were absent.

"Your last letter mentioned the Urn of Sacred Ashes," Loghain prompted.

Carver meekly nodded. "For the sake of healing Arl Eamon, Wardens Elissa and Alistair have sought out Haven. I will follow them shortly."

Loghain hummed. "Do you believe in the ashes' abilities as you do the wardens'?"

Carver froze.

"So it's real," Loghain murmured, his gaze cutting through Carver like a sword. "I see. Then you know no other command than the one I've already given you."

Carver recognised the same tone he often employed. "Teyrn...?"

Loghain's voice dropped to a thin whisper, and Carver leaned in.

"Reserve a pinch of ashes for the king and queen."

# Shielder

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slow updates. I got covid even though I'm on top of my vaccines. I don't have a fever though, so that's good! Also, when I have the brainpower, I keep writing. Thank you so much for all of your support!

Carver adjusted the helmet on his head, a new piece of Maric's Shield armour along with the breastplate Carver wore. Paired with Foggy's gauntlets, there was no mistaking Carver's position in the king's army. Loghain had listened to Carver's reasonably censored update on what Solona's experience had revealed on darkspawn – along with Cauthrien's fate – and had ordered Carver to be accordingly suited up before the Wardens could bring their treaties to Orzammar. It had been arduous enough convincing Loghain that he needn't send another Shielder on Carver's quest.

...So much for being covert.

Then again, not all members of Maric's Shield were knights. Satin was a good example.

Carver sighed.

Not all members had the renowned *Summer Sword*, either. Carver was essentially a walking culmination of Ferelden history. At least Leliana had chosen to stay back in Ostagar with Solona while the warden slew darkspawn and used their blood for medical experiments. The bard wasn't willing to let Carver forget he was a *kid knight* anytime soon.

No, instead Carver's only company was *Morrigan*, who freely questioned him on his inefficient distractions. She disliked how often he got sidetracked from hunting down the archdemon. Apparently chasing homeless people for information on a qunari sword or seeking to rescue a boy from demonic possession was a waste of time.

"You would have benefitted from holding the boy's sanity hostage," Morrigan continued, "same as you should now with the king's health. All the nation's forces would then fall in line to end the blight."

Case in point, Morrigan's suggestions.



“Judge me not,” Morrigan berated at Carver’s side-eye. “You asked for my opinion, and I gave it.”

“I’m not saying anything,” Carver murmured.

“No.” Morrigan crossed her arms. “You merely wish for me to fill our journey with chatter, do you? Am I a fool of the wilds?”

“If I believed that, I wouldn’t have asked for your opinion.”

“He is silver-tongued, I see.”

The trek to Haven seemed to stretch on forever. Carver merely wished for Morrigan to warm up to “people of society,” possibly strike up a friendship with others. An acquaintance. At least one pet.

Carver hoped it wouldn’t be him.

His competition was Alistair.

“Ahead.” Morrigan twitched her chin up.

A Guerrin soldier tripped quickly down the slopes of Haven’s gates to hail them, only to stammer upon finer grasp of Carver’s armour. Morrigan strode past the soldier without staying longer than his first nonsensical jumble.

Carver placated the soldier as he followed Morrigan up the steep terrain. The witch was well-accustomed to nature, to Carver and the soldier’s wounded pride.

“Breathe,” Carver suggested.

“Sh-Shielder!” came the legible gasp. “I beg pardon, we wasn’t expecting company — given the state of Redcliffe, see. Some wardens have gone ‘n mixed up with undead in ol’ ruins. A brother was claiming otherwise, some cult stuff, while rubbing charcoal over stone reliefs when we followed, if you’ll believe it! Had a leg broke ‘n everything! Ah, have ye heard of Redcliffe’s condition?”

Carver strode for Jory’s position outside of Haven’s ancient temple, following along the soldier’s breathless word vomit. “You and a squad of the Guerrin Legion were sent to Haven as a lawful force. A tortured Brother Genitivi believes Warden Elissa and Alistair are ahead of you encountering cultists. You’re not expecting backup from Redcliffe.”

“Aye, how did you—?”

Carver halted before Jory, drawing attention as he gestured. “Clear out the bodies and prepare a pyre in the fashion of Redcliffe. I am your backup.”

Jory and the soldiers around them stumbled at his sudden arrival. Not a few of them hastily saluted, while Jory flustered.

”Hold on, now—“

”If none of your soldiers can be spared beyond this duty,” Carver pressed on, “then I’ll not wait. I have a pilgrimage to complete.”

Carver moved for the temple at the top of the mountain, a meaningful turn of his head drawing Morrigan alongside him in expectation of direct action.

Jory jerked to grab them. “The wardens slaughtered an entire village!”

”Heed Brother Genitivi’s account and injuries,” Carver tossed back. “I would consider the present evidence before trying to arrest two wardens in the middle of a blight.” He paused. “Where are the children?”

”Pardon?”

Carver turned to Jory. “Warden Elissa and her company wouldn’t kill non-combatants. Where are the children of this village?”

Jory stammered, glancing at his soldiers for insight no one had. Aside, a soldier offered, “We found none among the bodies, ser.”

”You combed the entire village for bodies,” Carver checked, “but you didn’t think twice when you found evidence of children living here? No?” Carver frowned at the soldiers’ imitations of gaping fish. “When I return, have answers ready.”

Carver left Haven behind to climb the temple’s stairs and veer off for a shattered corridor. A tongue of flame from Morrigan found moving air better than a candle, leading them to cracks in off-colour stone. A stronger flame found its hidden lock.

Morrigan snorted from alongside Carver. “Impatient.”

”Helmet,” Carver explained.

”No complaints here,” Morrigan smoothly dismissed. “You should have been this bold sooner.”

“You think loudly.”

“Am I wrong?”

That it was confusing for Carver to prefer being unnoticed when he was outside of his armour? Anyone with sense would have agreed with Morrigan. Carver shook his head.

“What are the chances Warden Elissa applied room-clearing to a dilapidated temple?”

“She lives,” Morrigan easily took the gamble.

Carver pushed the stone door to reveal a shortcut. “And Alistair where dragonlings are involved?”

“Those creatures do love nesting in old places.”

“Not a question, Morrigan.”

She watched Carver heave the door open, not helping. “Awfully bold assumption, even for a well-adjusted person.”

“Just secure in my pessimism.”

“Stick with realism, ‘tis better fitting.”

They walked down a corridor until they reached a mountain top, regarding the weight of the mammoth ruins behind them and the distant opening to the humble, original temple ahead. Carver’s shortcut was but a sliver of shadow in the wrinkles of the larger ruins’ face. From its cavernous mouth spilled out Elissa, Alistair, and the rest of their party. Echoing yells of cultists and dragonlings followed them in growing volume.

Morrigan glanced at Carver.

He unsheathed his sword. “Not what I was expecting,” he confessed.

“Dragonlings?”

“Running, actually.”

Elissa was nursing her arm while Shale was hauling Wynne. “Why are there so many dragonlings!?”

“You should have waited!” Alistair cried out, turning around only to

bash a reptile with his shield. “What are we if not a party!?”

“Slow!” Elissa returned.

Zevran tossed a flask of poison behind them, stalling the cultists. “If that’s your new motto, bella, we’re all dead very soon.”

Carver chopped off Father Kolgrim’s head, he and Morrigan ambushing the cultists and dragonlings.

“Carver!?”

**“Morrigan!?”**

Carver snatched Kolgrim’s horn and parried a cultist’s blade. “Keep running.”

Sten and Zevran determinedly pushed the party ahead, Alistair a beat behind them. Elissa glanced back, but Alistair fixed her gaze straight ahead.

“A helmet doesn’t make Carver part of Maric’s Shield!” Elissa resisted. “We have to help!”

**BWOOOOOO!**

Alistair’s panic carried across the valley. “Trust me, Elissa, we don’t!”

Carver tossed aside Kolgrim’s horn to regrip his sword, focusing on the enemies he had just aggravated. Morrigan fried half of them with a chain of lightning.

The witch scoffed. “I don’t suppose you spend confidence uselessly?”

Carver cut down a cultist, two more and a dragonling filling their place. “I am no savage, Morrigan. Strategy drives me.”

**ROAAAAR!**

The entire mountain seemed to tremble with the violent descent of a winged adult dragon upon the cultists. Carver and Morrigan downed the remaining dragonlings while the cultists were shredded into pulp and bones by a clinically insane dragon. Or at least one driven mad by centuries of Kolgrim’s horn. Carver’s head was still ringing.

*“Maker’s breath!”* Alistair gaped from far ahead.

The dragon turned its slitted gaze on Carver and Morrigan, nostrils flaring with the scent of freshly-slain dragonlings.

“As I was saying...” Morrigan drawled.

Carver closed his eyes and mentally reached for an apple.

*“Dragon’s breath!”*

Carver was shoved aside in time to be spared a snap of the dragon’s jaws. Morrigan flicked Carver’s helmet for good measure.

“Cancel the fire, and we’ll still have claws, teeth, and a tail left to contend with!”

“Right — sorry!”

Morrigan unleashed lightning at the dragon, a branch of it racing through Carver like static.

“I said I was sorry!”

A boulder smashed against the dragon’s side, snapping its attention to Shale and the rest by the original temple. Alistair and Dog stood with their guard up between their wounded and the dragon. Shale catapulted another handful of mountain.

Morrigan speared the dragon with ice while Carver opened a wound in its leg with Summer Sword. He rolled sideways from a bite to slice into another leg. Despite Shale and Morrigan’s presence in perfect range, the dragon irately focused on Carver.

Morrigan hummed. “Unused to mages you are, but leashing the dragon’s throat was a smart touch.”

Carver ducked under a flurry of claws. “I — live — for your — praise!”

“Be the bait,” Morrigan’s tone cracked with excitement. “I shall do what predators must.”

Carver raced under the dragon’s belly for its other end, and what followed next, he couldn’t say. Only that as the dragon pivoted, a shadow burst over Carver, before the dragon cried out without fire and collapsed over him like a brick house. A spray of crimson ice was lodged across the dragon’s entire body.

Carver crawled out from under the dragon to distantly see Wynne pale behind Dog. “Blood magic.”

“About time you caught up!” Elissa called out to Carver with relief colouring her tone. “And you, Morrigan — I’d say you’re a welcome surprise!”

Both sides strolled to meet in the middle, taking inventory of each other’s conditions. Their breaths left them in puffs of white air, only the recent battle colouring their cheeks. Morrigan briefly explained her presence while Elissa caught everyone up on Haven’s temple, gesturing to the humble original behind her. Given the state of the monstrous newer one, it was safe to assume that the original temple would be precarious to navigate at best.

“That’s why Shale is key,” Elissa continued. “She can stack a boulder into gaps where we otherwise wouldn’t be able to cross a floor. She can also create doorways where the original ones are ruined. Isn’t that right, Shale?”

The golem proudly lifted her chin. “Naturally.”

Elissa nodded. “We just need to tread carefully and in a single file.”

Carver lifted a hand to the original temple. “Lead the way.”

Several pairs of eyes turned to him.

Ah. Elissa had an injured arm. So far as anyone else knew, the path ahead contained unsteady stone formations and possibly dragonlings. Not a spiritually-maintained gauntlet.

Carver faltered. “Or not.”

“I’ll lead,” Alistair easily perked up. “If Carver isn’t worried about danger, then I have nothing to fear. That’s how it works, yes?”

“No,” Carver quickly denied.

The rest of the party filtered past him to follow Alistair.

“It’s not,” Carver muttered as he took the rear.

Ahead, Elissa whispered to Alistair. “What did I miss...?”

They arrived at the first pair of doors in the original temple, where a fully-armoured man halted them. Unlike modern warriors, he wore only chainmail and short-sleeved robes over it with a leather belt cinching the cloth at his waist. However, every inch of his modest clothing was lovingly dyed and sewn with marvellous detail such that when the man moved, it seemed that fields of wheat and a flock of indigo birds moved with him. Even his leather helmet was braided into a piece as delicate-looking as it was battle-tough. The man's face was forgettable in its features, yet an obvious peace permeated his aura down to the way he stood and cast his gaze. Merely meeting the man's eyes felt surreal.

Then he spoke. "I bid you welcome, pilgrims. Many years have I last prepared the faithful to see Andraste."

Elissa squinted, yet refrained from drawing her sword. "You're no cultist."

"I am a guardian," the man stated. "Only those proven pure-hearted may approach my teacher's ashes. Assuring such is my duty for as long as this earth requires me."

"He's a disciple of Andraste," Wynne murmured in revelation. "My dear, we're in the right place."

Elissa turned at the address. "What do you mean?"

"In the Ancient Age," Wynne shared, "the Disciples of Andraste were a priesthood founded by Andraste's first followers. However after Andraste's passing, religious extremists infamously tainted the priesthood's reputation by massacring Tevinter mages in Aeonar as a twisted vengeance against mage-lords. Most of Andraste's original disciples then split off to spread our lady's teachings through separate religious groups, while the remaining members of the Disciples of Andraste were never heard of again."

Alistair shrugged. "The ancient cult died out."

"Not so," Wynne determined, "by one detail: the first Andrastian priests were all male."

"Like the Tevinter chantry," Zevran noted.

"Father Kolgrim and the rest were remnants of the extremists," Elissa realised, looking back at the guardian. "While you...should be dead."

The guardian merely looked at them. “The descendants of my brethren lost their way, silencing those among them who disagreed with their direction. I heard their cries, sorrowful then quickly snuffed.”

“Your duty fixed your place here,” Elissa acknowledged. “You may find peace in the fact that my allies and I have avenged the innocent. Father Kolgrim and his followers are all dead.”

“The Maker commands justice,” the guardian disagreed. “I leave the scales in his hands, as I have in years past and shall in years forward. My peace is my own.”

Morrigan scoffed. “We know not if this false mage speaks true of his age, identity, or philosophy. If ancient ashes exist, we will find them by *searching* instead of idly chatting with a stranger.”

Alistair blinked at her. “This man is a mage?”

Carver shifted. “It’s possible his devotion to his duty has attracted spirits of faith over the years, empowering his body and lengthening his years. The phenomenon may draw similarities with Solona’s case, with exception to the fact that this man isn’t connected to the Fade like a born mage.”

Sten grunted. “He is a soldier. One can sense it.”

“Regardless of who he is,” Carver continued, “it speaks to his dutifulness that spirits would cross the veil just to answer his resolution.”

Leaving the Fade to enter the waking world naturally twisted a spirit into a demon, like that of “wisdom” into “pride.” However, the guardian possessed such purity that, despite not being consciously aware of the Fade, a spirit could slip into his body without changing its essence. The situation was different from Wynne and Solona’s spirit magic or a certain timeline’s blood magic that could force a demon into a non-mage, like a Templar of Kirkwall. The guardian likely wouldn’t be able to describe how he facilitated such behaviour. The man was basically a walking ecosystem that developed once every thousands of years. Statistically, a miracle.

“No,” Elissa fluttered her hand, “Morrigan is right. We’re just here for the ashes, not answers. Ser guardian – if you demand a test, I’ll give you one.”

Elissa’s aggression barely ruffled the guardian. “It is not my place to



decide your worthiness, but the gauntlet's. I need only ask each of you pilgrims a question."

Morrigan tittered. "This is bound to be interesting."

"Elissa." Subtle shock rippled through the party at the guardian's calm address. "There is much suffering in your past, that of yours and others'. You abandoned your father and mother, leaving them in the hands of Rendon Howe knowing he would show no mercy. Your path is laid out before me and plain to see in the lines of your face and the scars on your heart. Lady and warrior, do you believe you failed your parents?"

Elissa stuttered, gaze wet with fright. "You...how...? No. The family heir was beyond Arl Rendon's reach. I had a duty as the second-born to protect our guests, and my parents...had *their* duties."

The guardian acknowledged her answer. "Then you do not dwell on past mistakes, neither yours nor someone else's."

Alistair's brows knitted with empathy as Elissa wiped her eyes. "In hindsight, it's easy for others to judge what you've done, but it doesn't make it any better."

"Alistair," the guardian greeted, "knight and warden. You wonder if the clash would have ended differently had you not stayed safely at the top of the tower. There were *two* of you wardens to light *one* flame. While your brethren were preventing darkspawn from invading the tower, you could have supported them. You wonder, don't you, if their deaths should have been your own?"

Alistair swallowed his shock. "Grigor, Richu, and the rest were all more experienced wardens. If I had just the chance, then...yes. They would have lived and probably seen this quest with Elissa through sooner."

Elissa clenched her good fist but said nothing.

Wynne consoled Alistair. Everyone was shaken. "It is sometimes difficult to see how our actions affect an outcome, but that doesn't mean our actions had no effect."

"Ever the advisor," the guardian noted, "ready with a word of wisdom. Do you wonder, Wynne, if you spout only platitudes burned into your mind in the distant past? Perhaps you are only a tool used to spread the word of the Circle and the Chantry. Does doubt ever chip

away at your truths?”

“You ask what you already know,” Wynne confirmed. “Of course I doubt at times. Only a fool is completely certain of himself.”

Sten impatiently huffed, shedding his surprise. “Demand whatever answers you want, human.”

The man dipped his head. “Sten, you came to this land as an observer, but you killed a family in a blind rage. Have you failed your people by allowing a qunari to be seen in this light?”

Sten spoke steadily. “I have never denied that I failed.”

Shale rumbled. “It seems that reflection on past mistakes is a constant preoccupation of the religious mind.”

“There is so little I can draw from you, stone giant.” The guardian’s unearthly gaze softened. “I feel the distant echo of a soul, dormant for so long and now awake....”

“Good for you,” Shale mocked.

“And with awakening,” the guardian continued, “the slow realisation of all you have lost. Ah, Shale. Your entire existence is a test of your will and courage. You have my respect.”

For once, the golem fell silent.

“Oh, good,” Zevran piped up. “For a moment there, I thought you were going to go on a weepy tirade and try to ‘share’ your feelings.”

“Zevran,” the guardian admonished. “Many have died at your hand. However, is there any you regret more than a woman by the name of—”

“How do you know about that?” Zevran cut off coldly.

“I know much,” the guardian replied. “It is allowed to me. Nevertheless, the question still stands, assassin. Do you regret—”

“Yes, the answer is yes,” Zevran brusquely interrupted. “If that’s what you wish to know, I do. Move on.”

“Of regret,” the guardian turned to Carver, “you know much, wanderer. You replaced the life of a babe in its crib. You traded worlds and consider neither a winning hand. On your path for victory

regardless, have you found yourself erring since the start?"

Carver's hands clenched on either side. "I won't stop on my mission."

"Be as that may," the guardian stated, "the past remains the same. You seek not peace but the 'best' outcome. You wonder if this is due to your shortcomings. Do you regret your path?"

Carver hesitated. "I'm not confident enough to pursue peace, it's true. Regret is a byproduct of stepping out of one's comfort zone." He glanced aside at his party, then at the sword at his belt, before lifting his chin. "However...no, I don't regret trying."

"And you, Morrigan," the guardian turned, "Flemeth's daughter. What—"

"Begone," Morrigan sniffed at the accidental mage. "I'll not play your games."

Dog barked.

Elissa and Alistair's body language was highly expressive. Just when the two thought the guardian would blink everyone out of existence, the man dipped his head. "I will respect your wishes. Good luck, pilgrims, for the way is open. May you find what you seek."

The guardian stepped aside of the doors, which slowly swung open.

Elissa led the party through to a corridor lined with worn statues. When the last party member stepped through the doorway, it closed shut on its own and an array of ghosts touched down before each statue. Carver experimentally pushed the sealed doors while the party split up between Elissa and Alistair to tentatively solve each ghost's riddle. Most of the party was quick to dismiss the ghosts as spirits, but a faithful few were humbled to realise that regardless of the what or how, the gauntlet had truly been set up by Andraste's first disciples. With the last riddle solved, the corridor's opposite pair of doors opened, beckoning the party to an antechamber. There, the spirit of Bryce Cousland greeted them.

Elissa stumbled. "Father...? No, this is a cruel lie. It must be!"

Bryce merely smiled softly. "I am part of the gauntlet, pup. I am Bryce. I am you. And it warms my heart to see you have come so far since I last saw you, my child. Your mother would be proud."

Elissa straightened with a firm brow. “What test do you have for us, spirit?”

Bryce chuckled and handed her an amulet. “None, pup. I only wish you good luck.”

Elissa grasped the amulet as Bryce faded away like an echo, forever distant yet not gone. Wynne murmured that the amulet possessed a magical boost to one’s constitution, shielding it from common illnesses and wounds. The mage helped Elissa wear it in hopes of improving the recovery of her broken arm, while the party silently proceeded to the next chamber.

Elissa suddenly drew her sword to defend Wynne from a thrown dagger.

“*Contact!*” Elissa cried out in room-clearing fashion.

Everyone immediately jumped into alertness as spectral mirrors of themselves descended on them with weapons. Morrigan frustratedly loosed a blizzard across the room to delay the bulk of their skilled opponents, yet a number had already closed in enough to endanger the unprepared among them. Alistair grunted under the weight of spirit Sten’s swings, already bleeding under his helmet where Asala had cut through. Carver didn’t have enough time to judge if it had been a glancing blow as a spirit Dog leapt up at him.

Zevran cut the spirit down with a cross of his shortswords and knocked a thrown dagger aside with another twirl. The two of them paired up to clear the room together.

“Any insights?” Zevran asked.

Carver fainted at a spirit Elissa and cut her arm. “They share our weaknesses.”

Afar, a spirit Zevran tucked his daggers away and unsheathed a pair of swords.

“Well, that’s not very helpful,” Zevran chirped. “I have a weakness for venom.”

Carver parried spirit Elissa’s blade away from Zevran. “I have a resistance to deathroot.”

“Unfortunately, I coat my blades with venom of higher quality.”

Zevran met his spirit self's blades, quickly redirecting momentum to counter strike — just to be neutralised with the same technique. Carver evaded a shield bash from spirit Elissa only to duck under a cone of ice from spirit Morrigan. A ray of frost caught Carver's foot and raced up his leg.

Carver visualised a mana-draining strike and hastily hacked at the ice with his sword. Zevran quickly grazed spirit Elissa's cheek with one blade and riposted spirit Zevran's shot at Carver with the other while he was distracted. Carver bitterly dismissed his anchored leg to raise Summer Sword, only for spirit Elissa to stumble sideways and burst in particles of fractal light.

Carver knocked spirit Morrigan back with a smite. "Higher quality, you say?"

"Like me," Zevran shrugged. "Fast-acting."

Carver's frozen foot combusted with sudden flame, reducing the ice into a puddle. Morrigan quipped something at Carver that was lost to the din of battle, but Carver fluttered a grateful hand as he and Zevran teamed up on spirit Zevran. A flying boulder suddenly shattered the room's momentum, averting would-be attacks into new assignments. As spirit Zevran darted through an opening elsewhere created by spirit Shale, Zevran and Carver quickly turned to meet spirit Sten's incoming swing.

"*Maldición*," Zevran cursed.

**BANG!**

Carver grit his teeth under the weight of Asala above his head. Zevran struck at spirit Sten's openings while the qunari was focused on Carver, but like any of his kind, Sten was immune to venom. It had been the direction his race's evolution had taken, and none other in Thedas could compare even with training.

Spirit Sten flicked his wrist, and Carver panicked as Summer Sword nearly went *flying* out of his hands. Carver side-stepped and recovered his grip, pincering spirit Sten between himself and Zevran.

They looked like children facing a giant.

Zevran danced around Sten's blows, unable to find another opening. "Haven't you been training with Sten?"

Carver leapt in with a jab, only for spirit Sten to meet him with the same yet more powerful move. Their blades ground against each other in a delicate battle of balance, scrutinising each other for the best path of redirection.

“I’m realising,” Carver admitted, “that Sten has been holding back in our training sessions.”

Zevran pounced for spirit Sten’s neck, but the spectre angled Summer Sword’s weight for the ground and, without looking, batted Zevran aside with the flat of Asala’s blade. Carver gracelessly tugged Summer Sword out of the ground and leapt back in time from spirit Sten’s returning swing. Zevran picked himself up with a groan and impatiently stabbed spirit Sten’s ankle from behind.

The spectre stumbled.

In unison, Zevran and Carver immediately whipped their blades out and beheaded their opponent. A burst of light rewarded them.

The real Asala suddenly swung down and cut an ambushing spirit Alistair in half.

Zevran and Carver turned to see Sten sheathing his sword and a spirit Carver exploding into motes of light behind him. The rest of the party could be seen beyond, finishing off the remaining spirits.

Sten lifted a brow. “You need more practice, Karasten.”

Carver exhaled into his helmet. “I know.”

# Pilgrim

With Wynne drained even before having entered the gauntlet, the party shared health potions and Morrigan's healing spells between themselves before tackling the next room. Fortunately, only an extreme test of trust awaited them.

"It's a puzzle," Carver pointed at the gaping chasm that no boulder from Shale could fill. "Each of us has to step on a tile around that hole in order, and a bridge will manifest accordingly."

Elissa squinted at the archaic etchings on the ground and readily accepted his interpretation. "Any idea on the order?"

Carver hesitated. "Only experimentation can solve that."

The party tested countless patterns of stepping on tiles until they believed they found the answer. Then Carver told them that for the bridge to manifest permanently, someone had to cross it during construction at least once.

Alistair stepped up. "I'll go."

Carver blinked and glanced at Elissa, but the woman wasn't looking at Alistair. In fact, her eyes strayed anywhere but to him.

Uh.

"I'm going." Alistair moved for the start of the bridge. "I trust all of you."

Elissa wordlessly pivoted to a tile, spurring the rest of the party to complete the puzzle. When the bridge permanently solidified, everyone crossed it and joined Alistair on the other side. A long stretch of stone awaited them, and the party began to trek the endless hallway.

Carver trailed at the back of the party and murmured to Wynne. "Warden Elissa and Alistair aren't talking?"

The elderly woman quietly sighed in surrender. "Elissa was unhappy with Alistair's confession to the guardian. Alistair doesn't wish to change his mind about his regrets."

Carver noted how the party had split up for the riddles. "So now we're

like children in a divorce,” he deduced.

Ahead of Carver and Wynne, Zevran muffled a cough. Next to him, Shale spoke. “What do you mean?”

Unfortunately, the golem lacked the ability to whisper.

“What’s that?” Elissa glanced back.

Carver remained straight-faced. “I was just catching up with Senior Enchanter Wynne on the temple.”

“Right,” Alistair remembered. “When you efficiently went on ahead.”

“I still needed help,” Elissa tersely said.

“You’ve obviously had this in the bag,” Alistair corrected. “The guardian was even happy with your answer. You don’t regret past mistakes.”

“I can.” Elissa finally looked at Alistair. “I have. Everyone has gone through childhood before. I just won’t regret *living*.”

“Oh, so now I’m a child?”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

In sync, Elissa and Alistair removed their helmets to see each other properly.

“It’s a *fact* that the other wardens were more experienced—“

“I don’t care! I’m glad to have *you*—“

“You don’t *care*—?”

Sten lifted each warden with one hand and separated them as they walked. “Parshaara. If nothing constructive will arise from this chatter, then collect yourselves and revisit the subject later.”

An awkward silence fell, punctuated by everyone’s echoing footsteps.

Elissa broke it. “I’m sad for the other wardens, of course I am. But if I had to relive the blight a *dozen* times, I would always choose to face it with you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” Alistair shook his head. “Grigor



was—“

“Straight from the Anderfels,” Elissa intoned. “I know. In another world, if you went down the tower to help him, I would have followed you, signal or no.”

“That can’t be, *you* have to live,” Alistair rejected.

“On what basis?” Elissa fumed. “Because I’m the newer warden? The weak one who needs the help of seasoned wardens?”

“It’s the complete opposite,” Alistair defended.

“I don’t care for your reasoning,” Elissa stated. “I just wish you’d treasure your life at least a little as much as I do.”

“Morrigan is right!” Alistair burst. Behind him, the witch blinked. “I’m a follower! I’m only in the Grey Wardens because of Duncan. You deserve so much *more* by your side!”

Elissa grabbed his armour. “And as *I’ve* said, I choose *you!*”

A different kind of silence fell.

Elissa and Alistair whipped their heads to the side, yet didn’t move away from each other as they walked. Even from where Carver trailed behind, he could see their ears burning red. Then the hallway opened up to actual flames.

“What in Maker’s name...?” Wynne gaped.

A wall of fire roared before the party, unfaltering even under Morrigan’s best spray of ice. No creature stood a chance of curbing the heat, much less creating a gap large enough to let them pass. A humble pedestal stood in front of the fire, barely more than a stone slab and yet patiently etched with a message.

*Cast off the trappings of worldly life and cloak yourself in the goodness of spirit. King and slave; lord and beggar; be born anew in the Maker’s sight.*

Zevran rose a brow. “We have to *die* to pass this test?”

“Carver?” Wynne turned.

Everyone directed their gazes his way. When Carver removed his helmet, he felt them shift at the unexpected action.

“This entire test has been a reflection of Andraste’s life.” Carver lowered his helmet to the ground, then removed his gauntlets. “She connected with others, faced her own strengths and weaknesses, and came to trust her allies with her life.”

Eventually, Carver shed his armour until he was only in a tunic and smallclothes. He felt and looked like a little boy. Still, he lifted his chin.

“We all know what happened next for her,” Carver said, and strode through the wall of fire.

**“Carver!”**

On the other side, Carver slowly opened his eyes and released a gust of air in relief. The flames had barely felt like a whisper. Then he looked ahead of him and froze, stunned.

There rose a stack of brilliant marble steps leading to an elevated platform, and a pale statue so lifelike — so *beautiful* — that Carver nearly forgot about the fire. The tall stone figure had been lovingly carved such that its flesh seemed to quiver under the sunlight filtering through the ancient temple’s roof. The figure’s robes seemed caught in mid-furl. The statue’s eyes were closed and its lips were gently curled as if the figure was basking in the sun’s warmth. At any moment, it seemed the statue might start humming with a voice that had famously captivated the Maker.

Andraste.

Who else could the statue be of? It seemed foolish to even consider otherwise. The truth rang through Carver like a struck gong.

“Carver...? Oh...!”

Behind him, the rest of the party followed through the fire in their simplest garments, quickly drawn to the same sight that had captured him. On a pedestal in front of the statue was an equally beautiful urn.

The guardian strode through the flames last, his armoured self untouched by the heat.

“You have walked the path of Andraste,” the man stopped past the fire, “and like her have been cleansed. You have proven yourselves worthy, pilgrims. Approach Andraste’s ashes as you wish.”

The guardian stepped back, vanishing behind the wall of fire which itself then sighed and flickered out.

Everyone distractedly slipped back into their full clothes, most of them still staring at the softly lit altar around them.

“I didn’t think we’d find Andraste’s actual resting place,” Alistair couldn’t stop gaping.

Wynne’s voice fell reverently. “I could not ask for a greater honour than to be here. I will never forget this feeling.”

“I stand in awe,” Morrigan commented. “Really.”

Carver approached the urn while a few others were still dressing up.

Zevran joined him. “Nice vase.”

Sten followed, barely blinking. “Congratulations, you’ve found a waste bin.”

Carver side-eyed the two of them but said nothing as he took two pinches of the ashes that went into a vial. He hid it away just as Elissa and the rest caught up.

“You taken a pinch yet?” Elissa asked.

Carver stepped back to give her space. “No.”

“How could he,” Alistair reminded and passed Elissa a vial. “He doesn’t have a container for it.”

“Right, right.”

Elissa grabbed the vial and startled when her fingers overlapped with Alistair’s. The two wardens paused, then cleared their throats as the vial moved between them. No one noticed Carver’s departure from the platform, or at least no one commented. Once the vial was secured, the party harvested what they could of the slain dragon, before Morrigan led everyone to the shortcut out of the temple. In contrast to the party order in the gauntlet, Elissa and Alistair took up the rear, bumping hands together.

“Ser Carver,” Elissa suddenly called.

Carver glanced back reflexively. “...Warden.”

“So you *are* in charge of this mission!” Elissa plodded over to the front, followed by Alistair. “Here I was, assuming leadership and ordering you around like a page. The humiliation!”

“I don’t mind you and Warden Alistair navigating for the group,” Carver corrected. “As wardens, you have skills intended for locating the archdemon.”

Alistair chuffed. “Nice to know we’re being used as intended.”

“I thought you were a scared kid on his first quest,” Elissa confessed. “Telling Alistair and I to get off the ground and stop petting Dog.”

Alistair spluttered. “That was only you!”

“Asking if you could buy a snack in Lothing,” Elissa continued. “Nervously clearing Redcliffe Castle with an invented technique. Yet all this time, you were eighteen!”

Carver blinked. “What?”

“And a knight!” Elissa punctuated, before demanding, “By who?”

“Irrelevant,” Carver dismissed. “We have ashes to deliver. Let’s move.”

“Yes, ser!” Alistair saluted. Carver shoved him.

At the foot of the temple, Jory and his squad surrounded the party with sheathed yet twitchy weapons. Only Brother Genitivi expressed joy at their arrival.

Elissa and the rest warily reached for their weapons. “I recognise you, Sergeant Jory,” Elissa curtly greeted, “while my companions and I were *saving Redcliffe*. Why this hostility?”

Genitivi seemed eager to leap out of his chair. “These soft-headed soldiers *refuse* to listen to me—!”

“You are in shock, brother,” Jory placated. “Focus your energy on recovering from your wounds.”

Morrigan elbowed Carver, who had his helmet on but stood behind Sten.

Carver reluctantly stepped up and stretched a hand out, answered by the Redcliffe soldiers loosening their grips on their weapons. “Sergeant Jory, your report.”

Jory flinched at the interruption. “Ser, the wardens *may* have rescued Brother Genitivi from torture, but that doesn’t pardon them from wiping out an entire village.”

Elissa snarled. “*Everyone* came swinging at us! Man, woman—”

“And child?” Jory questioned, turning to Carver. “We searched for children just as you ordered. The evidence suggests that the battle had frightened them out of their parents’ embrace and straight into the wilderness. Their parents must have stayed behind to delay the wardens with what few weapons they had.”

“There is a *bloody altar* in one of these houses,” Alistair spluttered. “I mean that in a literal sense!”

“It could be anything,” Jory defended. “It could be bloody now, no thanks to you.”

“The cultists here had one tenet,” Carver interceded, “defend Andraste – who is reborn as a dragon – from outsiders at any cost. Or in the case of their children, at any expense. The adults had abandoned the children to *leap* at an opportunity to kill outsiders, hence the overwhelming horde that had greeted Warden Elissa and her companions. The battle had certainly frightened the children out of Haven – on that we can agree.”

“Dragon?” Jory spluttered. “Do you hear yourself, ser?”

“Get off your feet,” Carver suggested, pushing past him and his circle of soldiers. “Go climb a mountain. You’ll find the evidence you need up there, along with the Urn of Sacred Ashes.”

The party followed him. “*If* you’re pure of heart,” Elissa muttered.

As they passed, Genitivi lurched in his chair with sparkling eyes. “You truly found it, then? The altar – the urn?”

Shale steadied the priest’s chair before he could fall over. “I want to pick it up.”

“Carefully,” Elissa allowed, and the golem scooped up Genitivi like he was a plaything.

“It’s bloody.”

“Give him time to heal,” Wynne shared.

“We found it all,” Elissa confirmed as everyone descended the mountain, leaving Jory and his soldiers to clean up the mess, “though we had to pass a series of trials to finally lay eyes on the urn. You must have mobility and a sense for fighting to attempt them.”

“Ah,” Genitivi sighed, “then I am not meant to enter the altar. Grateful am I to have at least stepped into the temple and taken its rubbings. Ooooh I have more than enough to finish my book!”

The party agreed to head straight to Lothering to reorganise themselves and see if they couldn’t find signs of Haven’s lost children along the way. Elissa sent a raven before their departure so that they could expect warden presence in Lothering and have Genitivi safely shipped off to Soldier’s Peak. Carver, meanwhile, sent a raven of his own and reserved the rest of his letters for runners in Lothering.

When Carver rubbed his nose bridge, Wynne noticed. “What troubles you, my dear?”

Carver shook his head dismissively. “Letters.”

He had to invent a wheelchair, pass the designs and construction off to Rhiannon in Denerim, and have it shipped to Soldier’s Peak for Brother Genitivi. Maybe Carver could credit the invention to Gorim Saelac, if the dwarven knight-turned-merchant was in Denerim. New to the surface and with a baby on the way, Gorim would benefit from the sales.

Carver also had his share of ashes to consider. He could organise for a pinch to enter Anora’s dinner wine and Cailan’s waterskin, but indirectly serving such a rare and finite resource seemed risky. Carver was better off requesting Loghain’s opinion before proceeding, which meant directly contacting the teyrn.

Then there were Haven’s missing children. Carver needed to add them to the list of people Basket’s soldiers had to search for around Lothering. The king’s army and Jory’s squad would need to coordinate on passing the villagers’ effects on to their children once identified. *If* the children could be identified. For a village that had lived isolated in *Ferelden* of all places, and for generations at that, Carver didn’t have strong hopes for an easy start. There was also a question of finding and funding orphanages to take in the lost children on top of those likely already orphaned by the blight.

In a way, Carver was lucky to be assigned to Elissa and Alistair’s mission. Otherwise, he would be forced to attend all the meetings he

was handing off to Basket and Rhiannon instead.

Budget meetings. So many budget meetings.

When the warden's party arrived in Lothing, Basket dropped his basket.

"Ser...!?" The sergeant quickly picked up his basket of mail.

Carver knew how they looked. A Circle mage, a qunari, two wardens, and – ah, yes, a six-foot-five golem carrying a Chantry brother on her shoulder like he was a pet bird. That was without taking into account that Zevran had his Crow hood pulled back so as not to advertise his occupation. Just a lowly elf wearing all black, he was. No hidden blades to speak of at all. In comparison, Morrigan and Dog were the most inconspicuous members of the party given Morrigan was merely beautiful and Dog was a common mabari.

Carver slapped a pile of letters on top of Basket's collection. "For Ser Rhiannon. When you have a moment, we also need to talk about missing children."

"Ah," Basket blinked, adjusting his basket. "You also have visitors – Ser Carver, Warden."

"Faren!" Elissa recognised as a dwarf strolled up to meet them.

"Surfacer," Faren greeted. "I came down for updates on Ostagar; apparently that Duncan's got us an alliance with Orlesian wardens, and it's serving us well. That's about when I got your letter here." He nodded at Genitivi. "This the nerd?"

Shale reluctantly parted from her pet, settling Genitivi down on a nearby tree stump. Genitivi chirped his gratitude and appreciation of Shale's sparkling crystals. His next book would be about golems.

A former Circle mage and a former werewolf stepped forward from behind Faren and, at his nod, helped Genitivi up into a cart. The two warden recruits deferentially retreated to give Faren space.

Alistair gaped at the discipline.

"Ser Carver."

Carver turned to see Loghain walking towards them, followed by Solona and Leliana. The soldiers in Loghain's vicinity all saluted

before proceeding with their activities. Carver belatedly crossed his arms in a Ferelden salute as Basket respectfully excused himself. Lothering's foot traffic moved around them like they were in a bubble.

"Teyrn Loghain," Carver addressed as the man came to a stop.  
"Warden Solona, Sister Leliana."

"Oh, we're here for Warden Elissa's party," Solona dismissed, she and Leliana moving to the other side. "Our next destination is Redcliffe."

Loghain lifted his chin, and Carver cleared his throat, turning to the party. "You should go on ahead. I'm sure the tavern has food."

The warden's party took the hint and left Carver alone with Loghain. Carver gestured, and the teyrn followed him to a road that ran through the old-fashioned half of Lothering. Their walk was quiet.

Carver coughed. "I didn't mean to summon you to Lothering."

"It was about time I checked on the soldiers here," Loghain dismissed. "Warden-Commander Duncan also expressed concern that only one representative of the Grey Wardens was supervising our second army in the north. I found it appropriate to professionally escort Warden Solona and her companion to Lothering – but no farther, naturally."

"Naturally," Carver echoed. Which meant officially, the two of them weren't having this conversation.

"You mentioned the ashes," Loghain stated.

"Acquired," Carver confirmed. "However, only enough for two doses."

"I can ensure the king's health," Loghain noted, "but you don't plan to visit Denerim any time soon."

"The wardens plan to head to Orzammar after Redcliffe." In a blight, to prioritise a healthy queen over dwarven support implied...treason.

Loghain fell thoughtfully silent. "I'll send Sergeant Atkins." Meaning Satin. Loghain pivoted and held out a hand. "This blight has demanded monumental tasks from all of us. You've performed well."

Loghain rarely praised others. This was the second time since joining the king's army that Carver had received it.

Carver grasped his hand, a vial in their grip. "Thank you, Teyrn."



Morrigan ambushed Carver. “I know the secret to my mother’s immortality.”

Carver blinked between her and the warden’s party in the distance preparing to depart from Lothering. “Morrigan—”

“You excel at deduction,” Morrigan emphasised. “Though it’s mostly guesswork, one can appreciate your skills. I have no love for my mother.”

“That hardly requires guessing,” Carver deflected.

Morrigan held up a black grimoire. This close to the witch, Carver couldn’t conceal his first reaction.

“She is a cantankerous toad,” Morrigan hummed, satisfied. “Her spells easily stray into the morally corrupt. However, I doubt one would leap to the conclusion that she maintains her existence through the possession of her *daughters*.”

“Morrigan—” Carver attempted again.

“You must kill her,” Morrigan finished.

Carver sighed. “Flemeth will just find a way to fake her death and live on.”

“Have you read her grimoire?” Morrigan raised a brow. At his reluctant denial, she sniffed. “I cannot be present when she dies, lest she takes over me and makes this effort moot. I trust few others with my future.”

“Others?” Carver watched Morrigan step aside to reveal Faren.

The red-haired rogue jerked his chin in greeting. “I stole the book.”

Carver looked at Morrigan. “You trust your survival with two people.”

It was miraculous enough that Faren hadn’t pilfered his findings from Kinloch Hold at the first opportunity. Morrigan probably appreciated Faren’s generosity to hand the grimoire to her for free and even volunteer to kill her mother at no cost, from one pragmatist to another.

Morrigan lowered the grimoire, gripping it with both hands. “I know

you two won't betray me."

Faren had no reason to, and Carver....

Carver groaned. He was no good with apostates. "Flemeth is powerful. I need to recruit help if Warden Faren and I want a chance at this."

Morrigan quieted. "I do not often say this, but thank you."

"Save it for when she's actually dead," Carver dismissed. "I'll tell Warden Elissa to proceed to Redcliffe without myself and a few others. We'll catch up."

Unsurprisingly, it was difficult finding unpaid labour for a steep challenge that didn't contribute to fighting the blight. The best means of recruitment was either boredom or blackmail.

Shale leapt at the chance to fight another dragon instead of trace a protected and thus uneventful path to Redcliffe.

Wynne disliked others hearing of her "spiritual condition."

"So there's a dragon in the Korcari Wilds," Wynne confirmed as the party split ways, "but it's not the archdemon?"

Carver shook his head. "Most of the time, she's an old woman."

"A dragon *and* a squishy," Shale summarised.

"This is because of Morrigan, isn't it," Zevran commented.

Everyone jumped while Carver swallowed a yelp. "*Where* did you come from...?"

Zevran twirled a dagger. "I slipped out of the warden's party to follow your tracks. Last time you split off from the main group, you picked up a stunning creature."

"A witch of the wilds," Wynne curtly stated. "Although...this elderly one you say can take on the form of a dragon? I can see how she would pose a threat to the king's army in Ostagar. Ah, so that's why you summoned Teyrn Loghain."

Carver choked. "I didn't *summon* him—"

"You certainly didn't summon the rest of the king's army," Wynne chided. "If you wanted help with a side task, Carver, you needed only

ask. Though I'm puzzled how you identified my situation."

"My cousin Solona is also a spirit healer," Carver deflected.

"Warden Solona," Wynne recalled slowly, "who performs blood magic for the wardens in Ostagar?" She paused. "This quest is a favour for Morrigan, isn't it."

Carver focused on the dirt path before them. "I wouldn't be surprised if witches weren't fond of each other."

"You have few reservations against blood mages," Wynne commented. "Why not run an errand for Morrigan while you're at it? Reduce her competition for when she returns home to her mother in the wilds?"

Aside, Faren remarked, "Her mother is the dragon."

"Matricide," Wynne deadpanned. "I'm hiding my connection to a spirit so I may partake in matricide."

"In business," Zevran crooned, "you are what we call a virgin."

"I'm going to back away," Wynne shuffled away from the group, "slowly."

"I *am* curious," Carver confessed and looked at Faren. "Why did *you* volunteer for Morrigan's task?"

The question surprised the dwarf. "Uh, she's pretty."

Oh.

It must have been easy being a simple-minded creature.

As they neared the location of Flemeth's hut and reality set in, Carver felt the blood steadily drain out of him with each step. His palms began to feel clammy. Carver had been avoiding the thought, but he knew facing Flemeth could mean death for him. Mere contact with her could result in his summary execution. Carver barely understood his own existence, and here he was, heading to the vessel of an ancient vengeful elven god that might erase him due to his knowledge because Carver didn't want Morrigan to feel like she couldn't trust anyone.

This was fine.

Carver had sent his letters, handed the ashes over to Loghain, and seen Elissa and the rest on their way to Redcliffe. If Carver was fated

to die today, the world would be able to spin without him. As it always had.

Someone else felt guilty for taking the original Carver's life. Maybe death would balance the scales—

But no, someone else hadn't spoken falsely. They didn't regret taking this path.

They didn't want to die.

"Carver," Wynne clutched him. "*Breathe.*"

The party had halted on the side of the path. Carver was struggling for long, even breaths.

"You're terrified," Zevran realised quietly. "After everything I've seen you go through, an *old lady* terrifies you? No offence, my dear Wynne."

"None taken," Wynne returned dryly.

Carver's voice was strangled. "Flemeth is a...*powerful* mage."

"If you believe the stories," Zevran allowed.

Faren crossed his arms. "How's this old crone gonna be any different than Avernus?"

Carver choked. "Flemeth houses a — spirit within herself. A potent one."

"Like I do?" Wynne asked.

Carver shook his head. No, Flemeth's guest wasn't a mere spirit, it wasn't even a sentient *feeling*. It was a true sapient. An ancient being with its own agenda. A s—

Ah.

Right.

A soul.

Carver took Wynne's advice. He breathed, then straightened. "I need to speak to Flemeth."

# Dragonslayer

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When they arrived at Flemeth's hut, the witch was outside waiting for them. Whether age or a foul temper withered her skin and hair, it seemed astonishing regardless that the woman could stand up straight. Like the guardian, her gaze held another world behind her eyes, yet unlike any man or blade, it pierced deeply and suddenly. Her spindly body picked its limbs up with a vigour that said only Flemeth held her own strings.

She crossed her arms. "'Tis about time, Carver of Lothing."

The group warily slowed to a stop. Carver's heart rate picked up. "You've known of me."

"How could I not sense your existence?" Flemeth sniffed. "I have been hunting the Templars of Lothing since that little town was built. I can no more miss your spiritual weight on reality than I can a massive *boulder* – and, just like one, you have been *rolling* your presence over to my humble hut."

Faren nudged Carver. "You just gonna let her talk to you like that?"

Carver steadied his hands. "I shouldn't carry more weight than others."

"Ha!" Flemeth cackled. "The fabric of reality does not lie! You have held it, haven't you? Grasped its corners to subdue the Fade? It would not come so easily if you had not slipped into the original Carver's body while he slept."

Flemeth's words knocked Carver off-balance. "Then...following that logic...you should possess Templar abilities instead of mage ones."

The wrinkles of Flemeth's amusement flattened. "How, pray tell, do *you* know that?"

The air itself chilled. Everyone's hands strayed to their weapons.

Flemeth's yellow eyes glinted. "You contain wisdom and foolishness in equal measure, boy. Everyone, short of dwarves, exists both in the

Fade and in their physical body. Non-mages have a stronger presence in their physical body than in the Fade; when they focus, they strengthen the physical world around them. Conversely, mages have a stronger presence in the Fade than in their physical body; their focus strengthens the Fade's presence around them, actualising concepts – like fire.”

Everyone stepped back in alarm when Flemeth's hand burst into flame.

Carver gripped Summer Sword. “You carry another soul in your body.”

“And you carry only one.” Flemeth lifted her chin. “Foolish wanderer, have you never deduced your existence? Even now capable of Templar abilities, you still lack understanding. When one dreams, their consciousness transfers from their body to the Fade, and back when they awaken. This is true even for those who cannot remember their dreams.”

Carver bit his lip. “I know I don't dream.”

“Because you are truly dead,” Flemeth stated coldly. “No, I speak of the original Carver. You entered his body when he slept. Now his vessel contains his spiritual presence, and your consciousness and spiritual presence. Where then, is *his* consciousness?”

Carver's mind raced before his breath left him in horror. “...The Fade.”

“If you wish to see him, you must venture there.” Flemeth smirked. “But I see the very thought petrifies you, boy. You missed your chance at the Circle; *then*, you would have had no choice. Now, you must willingly find your way.”

Carver's voice shook. “Carver has been there...for *eighteen years*.”

Flemeth raised a brow. “Do you regret it?”

“Rescuing a babe's body?” Carver exhaled slowly. “No. I just wish it hadn't been me. It should have been someone smarter, someone who would have figured this out sooner—”

“That child only has you,” Flemeth cut off. The fire faded out from her hand as she lowered it. “You must work with the hand dealt.”

“Of which is not a winning hand,” Carver echoed, before straightening. “Thank you. Truly. However, I did come here for one purpose.”

“Oh?” Flemeth barked out in revived amusement. “Morrigan sent you, did she? What has that child offered in payment?”

“I asked for none,” Carver admitted. “I just want her to be able to trust others.”

“You are deliciously hypocritical,” Flemeth chuckled. “You expect others to open their hearts when you keep yours sealed off.”

“I want the best for others,” Carver corrected. “I don’t expect to be a part of it.”

A thread of understanding flickered between Carver and Flemeth. They were perhaps the only two people in the world who could come close to understanding how the other felt. Still, close didn’t equate to *close*.

Flemeth stepped back, raising both palms to the sky. “You know that killing my body might not kill me.”

Carver drew Summer Sword, everyone else quickly following. “I know.”

**ROAAAAAAR!**

Before everyone’s eyes, Flemeth’s figure bloated and twisted until a yellow-eyed dragon unfurled its wings in her place, stretching out to flatten the trees and stomp on a boulder, crushing it. When it roared, the very skies churned grey and trembled. A salty wind picked up through the marshlands.

Carver turned to his party grimly. “After what you’ve heard, I understand if you don’t wish to assist me. Only I really volunteered for Morrigan’s task knowing what to expect—”

“No! Silence! Stop there!” Zevran interrupted, gripping Carver’s arm. “You think I don’t know you’ve been hiding things? *Everyone* has secrets. That doesn’t change the fact that I’ve fought alongside you. I still will. *Now tell us what to do!*”

Carver lowered his gaze and realised that Zevran was wearing the leather gloves Carver had gifted him. Wynne, Shale, and Faren were

already standing nearby at the ready.

“By definition,” Wynne offered, “I’m an abomination.”

“You’re all squishies,” Shale commented.

“I don’t really care,” Faren honestly admitted. “Let’s kill something!”

Flemeth lashed out with a claw, and everyone leapt back as a wave of dirt fell over them.

“I’ll curb her fire!” Carver yelled above the chaos. “Zevran and Faren, split her attention! Shale, you’ll be dealing the heaviest damage! Wynne, provide cover fire and healing!”

*“On it!”*

Carver rolled aside another claw and smited Flemeth’s jaw. The dragon loosed a spray of fire that compared to liquid heat instead of an explosive fireball. Carver inwardly swore. With double the spiritual presence in Carver’s body, nearby mages would have a harder time strengthening the Fade’s presence. With *someone else’s* conscious effort, highly potent Templar abilities would manifest. However, in contrast, Mythal’s consciousness could freely move between Flemeth’s body and the Fade, else Mythal wouldn’t have been able to join her soul with Flemeth’s in the first place. Flemeth essentially had the ability to strengthen the physical world *or* the Fade around her – she just chose to strengthen the latter.

Which meant even if Carver focused on the real world, the damage from Flemeth’s dragon breath would only be halved, not sealed. She was essentially a dragon god.

The dragon inhaled.

*“Dragon’s breath!”* Carver cried out, and everyone scattered.

**BOOM!**

Even after fully dodging the attack, the shockwave knocked Carver off his feet and sent him flying into a fallen tree. He hastily picked himself up and refocused. He had mentally slipped his area cleansing for just a *second*, and Flemeth’s breath had burst out of her like falling stars. In his periphery, Carver could see Shale had hunkered down to shield Wynne from the worst of the impact. Faren and Zevran had intuitively darted to Flemeth’s tail end in time to avoid the fire. Now



the rogues were targeting her joints with rusty or poisoned weapons while evading a tail whip.

“Focus on her wings!” Carver called out and dug in deep for another smite.

**SHHHHHHRRRRRIIIIEEEK——**

**BOOM!**

Carver swiftly timed his smite with the ignition of Flemeth’s breath, and the air exploded between them. Carver was sent flying back before he dug his heels into the ground, leaning forward to also anchor his sword into the dirt. A deep scar traced his path through the marsh. Simultaneously, Flemeth staggered back with a shriek and shake of her head. Faren and Zevran severed a wing tendon.

**KACHAK.**

Flemeth snapped her jaws at them, but they split off in opposite directions. Faren leapt on top of Flemeth and raced up her back, crisscrossing his slashes as he did. Zevran tossed a poison flask behind him as he entered stealth.

“Hey, ugly,” Shale mocked, “eyes on me!”

**CRASH!**

Flemeth turned just to be slapped with a fistful of rock. Both dragon and golem stumbled as the earth shook at the contact. Faren slipped and hugged the base of Flemeth’s neck with his thick arms before he could fall off.

“Oy, *Carver!*” Faren bellowed.

Carver sprinted. In the corner of his eyes, he could see Zevran stealing in with venomous blades and Shale demanding Flemeth’s attention through a flying boulder. Suddenly, everyone’s wounds closed up.

From the side, Wynne picked herself up with her staff — and uppercut Flemeth with a stone fist.

Carver’s heart hammered in his chest. For the first time in his life, he felt lucky.

**“Raaah!”**

Carver leapt up at Flemeth's horns, swung himself onto her head, and sank Summer Sword deep between her eyes. The dragon stumbled and fell sideways, her long neck rippling off the ground with momentum and her jaws snapping for the sky. Carver lost his grip and crashed on his side. Just as Flemeth began to recover, Carver stood up and axed his sword down on her neck.

**THUD.**

Faren slithered out of the mess while everyone gathered, panting. Shale poked Flemeth's corpse once, twice, then harrumphed smugly. Flemeth's blood was already pooling around them.

"It's dead," Shale decreed.

"And we're a bloody mess," Wynne announced. "Pardon my manners, but we must borrow the witch's household amenities and wash up. Faren, if you would."

"Psh, easy." The dwarf jovially trudged over to the wooden hut squatting low on the ground and revealed lockpicking tools from his pockets.

Zevran indignantly followed. "I can pick locks."

Wynne arched her brow.

Carver plodded over, wiping blood off his helmet and face. If they were going to kill someone, they might as well also steal and use her stuff.

"I mean what I say," Carver meekly shared with the party. "Thanks."

Zevran flashed a grin while Wynne hummed. "I can guess that your condition will stay a secret from the others?"

Carver reluctantly nodded. "I don't expect others to be as... understanding."

"And it shouldn't," Shale scoffed. "That would be naïve."

"I appreciate it, Shale."

The golem lifted her chin proudly.

"Oh!" Faren picked the door open. "Cheese!"

They returned to Redcliffe in time to witness Isolde sign over several tonnes of textiles to the Grey Wardens of Soldier's Peak. Solona had successfully healed Arl Eamon with the ashes and blood magic, and as the most senior warden present, Alistair had deferred to Elissa's request that they be paid for their efforts with fabric. The young Cousland grasped that finer towels, bed sheets, and bandages boosted morale and cleanliness, having grown up experiencing the results. Carver and his party were eager to experience it themselves after their trip through the marshes.

As the dragon-slaking group passed Morrigan, Faren muttered, "Your mother was a pain in the neck."

Morrigan watched the group walk away. "They knew?"

Carver wiped his hair and sweat back from his eyes as he followed. "They found out."

And they had helped anyway.

Morrigan stared after them silently.

After everyone cleaned up and caught up on rest, they gathered at one of the long oaken tables in Redcliffe Castle's great hall. It was decided between plates of food that their next heading would be Orzammar – or more accurately, Orzammar's gates in the Frostback Mountains. The underground kingdom was known to be picky about those allowed into one of Thedas's last preserved thaigs. Whether directly or by dwarven messenger, Elissa and Alistair aimed to apply the ancient warden treaties to hopefully more effect than in the Brecilian Forest. Past experience suggested that having an understanding of the target people's history and social practices would vastly help.

When Elissa asked, Faren confirmed he could lend his native knowledge of the kingdom to the party. However, this was on the basis that Elissa would use her status as a human noble and warden to demand information on Faren's little sister. Faren also wanted to receive the information in front of Orzammar's gates himself. Last Faren recalled, his sibling had expressed faith in her unnamed paramour who would ostensibly protect her from Faren's bad break-up with the Carta. The messy event had occurred shortly before Duncan had recruited Faren. If Faren had a chance to verify his sister's safety from above surface, the former criminal was going to seize it.

That was when Bodahn and Sandal reunited with the group in the great hall. The former was appalled to realise that Faren was a true-bred Carta gangster.

Well, retired.

Fired.

Upon Bodahn's description of the Carta, Alistair's jaw dropped. "I'm sorry – we left *Faren* alone in charge of Soldier's Peak? For *how long*?"

"The mages and former werewolves seem to be faring well," Elissa reasoned. "I haven't heard of any complaints from the Drydens, either. But Duncan has a point; we need a greater warden presence in our current base. At this point, Faren, you best return to Soldier's Peak with Solona."

Faren pointed a drumstick at Carver. "Nah, I wanna hear his alternative first."

Alistair muttered into his cup. "Using more than three syllables now, are we?"

Carver slowly lowered his soup spoon.

"*Everyone* has opinions," Faren rolled his eyes at the past chatter, "but at the end of the day, I can see that these surfacers look to you. I'm not selling my know-how to Elissa, 'cause the one I hafta convince is you, isn't it?"

Carver had chosen to dine in merely his tunic and trousers. His iconic armour and sword were covertly stored away in his guest room. Still, he would have preferred Faren had gained observational skills in a more discrete setting.

Carver gave the present wardens the chance to speak up while he tasted a spoonful of chicken soup, but his cutlery travelled to and from his mouth in silence.

"Knowledge of Orzammar's communities." Carver rested his spoon in his bowl. "What makes you think I lack such knowledge, or the means to fill any gaps?"

Faren thumped his flagon down on the table. "*Now* we're talking. My instincts are rarely wrong!" The rogue chuckled. "Let's start with the fact that any dwarf from Orzammar only interacts with the surface if

they're trading or smuggling lyrium. So why waste your time reaching out to unreliable contacts when you've already got a ready resource like me?"

Carver's lips twitched. "You're hardly up to date."

"But I'm loyal," Faren pointed out. "Sworn warden, and all. I only wish to check up on the last of my living family."

Carver scanned Faren's face before lowering his voice. "*Two* of your family, you mean."

Faren scoffed. "My father and I aren't exactly close—"

"Your mother," Carver corrected. "Understandable, given her fondness for mosswine. Your sister spoke true, though, as she is indeed secure with her lover. Who wouldn't be with someone who calls their beloved an 'amber rose?'"

Faren's drumstick slipped onto his plate with a dull thump. "How do you know that...?"

"Irrelevant," Carver dismissed. "You're in the middle of persuading me to bring you to the Frostbacks. Go on."

Faren squinted. "You run a background check on me?"

So, unlike most of Thedas, Orzammar had those. Interesting. The lack of such in Ferelden and the Free Marches was the reason why former Circle mages like Malcolm Hawke could immigrate without Templar capture.

Carver leaned in. "Does Orzammar conduct an annual census?"

"Fine!" Faren leapt to an assumption and tore into his drumstick. "I get it!"

Carver leaned away from Faren's mess with concealed confusion and turned to Elissa and Alistair. "Given their contribution to haematology and healing in Ostagar, Solona and Leliana would be sufficient representatives for the Wardens' interests in Soldier's Peak. Bodahn, you can expect a secure escort to Soldier's Peak with these two in return for the same hospitality you've shown us."

Bodahn blinked. "Did I miss something?"

Faren choked. "Wait, I'm going?"

“To the Frostbacks?” Carver returned to his soup. “If you behave.”

Faren forcibly gulped the meat lodged in his throat. “By the ancestors, I will!”

Elissa shrugged as she chewed on her bread. “It’s settled then.”

Carver resumed his meal in relief. He had managed to curb the chaotic member of the party preemptively. His mind would also be at ease the more wardens the party had when approaching any task in the Deep Roads.

“Up-to-date knowledge of Orzammar...” Zevran hummed. “You’re nervous about the dwarven kingdom.”

At this, Alistair’s sense of self-preservation had his ears perking up. Sten turned his gaze to Carver, likely also aware that the last Carver had been noticeably *aware* of a place, it had been the hot mess that was Haven.

Elissa noticed and zeroed in on Carver. “Is the archdemon there?”

“In Orzammar?” Shale dryly remarked from the party’s end of the table.

“The Deep Roads *are*—” Elissa began.

“Warden Elissa,” Carver placated, “you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“You’re doing that thing where you deflect with logic,” Elissa bulldozed. “Maker, it makes *sense*. After Ostagar, the archdemon could have burrowed back underground to regroup with its forces. When it’s time for another great clash, it will resurface again.”

“A hypothesis,” Carver stated. “However, the focus of my concern lies elsewhere. Bodahn, what news have you of Orzammar?”

The puzzled merchant distractedly handed Sandal a bread basket. “None I can gather from my dwarven fellows, though it seems you know more than I?”

Orzammar’s censorship philosophy loosely mirrored the Soviet Union’s pre-glasnost: manifest strength, conceal weakness. Stability was the status quo. Even if the common people’s opinion of the nation was to drop to “stagnant,” it was to never fall to “rotting” regardless if it was the truth.

To start, Orzammar denied a caste to dwarves who travelled to the surface, despite the fact that trade with the surface was Orzammar's economic lifeline. Orzammar's cultural department emphasised that exposure to the surface was loss of one's heritage, compounded with the root dwarven fear of "falling into the sky." The department never mentioned Orzammar's declining population in conjunction. Denial of a caste was Orzammar's means of retaining its citizenry.

Economically, Orzammar was always ahead in technology and lyrium mining. The surface world "needed" Orzammar. The common dwarf was to believe that Orzammar could be self-sufficient without surface relations, and simply chose otherwise due to the nation's benevolence and for greater prosperity. Foreign news was strictly and physically filtered. Activity in every inch of Orzammar was diligently recorded by the Shaperate. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Orzammar's internal information and censorship network was the most powerful in all of Thedas.

For Bodahn to have heard nothing noteworthy from Orzammar, the former citizen was either protecting its image, or Orzammar's border security was tightly leashing gossip on the surface.

Just to be sure, Carver added, "Nothing of King Endrin Aeducan?"

Bodahn furrowed his brows thoughtfully. "The king fell ill a while back. I heard it aged him greatly: heartsickness, was it? Some royal family matter."

Gorim Saelac was already in Denerim. It was more than just a family matter. Still, Carver knew better than to suggest that if Endrin hadn't passed away, he would soon.

"We need Orzammar to readily respond to the ancient treaties," Carver dismissed Elissa's attention. "I would naturally be attentive to the king's health."

"Uh-huh," Elissa drawled. "Just like Arl Eamon's health."

Alistair muttered into his food. "This better not involve more sacred relics."

X

After Solona, Leliana, and the Feddics split from the party in Redcliffe, Elissa and the rest sailed across Lake Calenhad to the opposite port, closest to Gherlen's Pass. The highway was one of a handful that cut

through the Frostback Mountains, originally established by Gherlen the Blood-Risen. The casteless dwarf had left for the surface, founded an adventuring party while he had travelled much of Thedas, then returned to Orzammar to overthrow its king, becoming a Paragon and king himself. After centuries of wars and natural events, Gherlen's Pass and Sulcher's Pass were the remaining useful highways that connected Orlais and Ferelden. However, only Gherlen's Pass was safe to travel year-round given it connected to Orzammar's gates and was maintained by three nations.

The warden's party traced a road that split off from Gherlen's Pass and eventually led to a brick plaza encircled by tents and stalls. Once upon a time, the bricks had popped with colour, but now only an impression remained of a glide symmetrical pattern, similar to rangoli. A long line of people cut through the plaza, up a stack of similarly faded stairs, and ended at a pair of ornately carved stone doors. Members of a family manning an art stall took turns coming as close to the doors as possible without touching the steps, and imitating the door's carvings on paper, clay, or wood.

As the warden's party neared the doors, they could see and hear a dwarf in armour as intricate as the doors curtly dismissing the person at the front of the line. A few other dwarves with the same armour and demeanour stood on either side of the doors and down the stairs.

"No entry allowed at this time, even on account of trade."

The person at the front of the line, a dwarf with a facial brand like Faren's, irritably huffed. "I have my licences in order, and my casteless mark won't wash off for another four hours. What's left for me to do business around here!?"

Elissa and the party skipped the line. "We're Grey Wardens."

A human with an ornate mask angrily gestured from behind them. "You cannot cut ahead!"

The armoured dwarf scoffed. "We already said for you merchants to stop forming lines. You're only exercising futility."

The Orlesian human, dwarven merchant, and the rest of the line grumbled and dispersed under direct address of the guards.

The dwarven guard turned to Elissa with a sigh. "Wardens, huh? We were expecting you to return a while back, but I suppose better late than never."



Elissa gaped in surprise, so Carver quickly stepped in. “Warden-Commander Duncan has been called to action against the southern horde of darkspawn. He hasn’t been able to send a substitute party until recently.”

The guard nodded. “When darkspawn reach the surface, it’s a true blight. I get it. So you’re here to search for the archdemon?”

Elissa covertly shot Carver a look to shut up before amiably agreeing with the guard. “We are *indeed* here to search for the archdemon.”

Carver sighed in surrender.

Elissa waved to Alistair. “Additionally, we have come to request Orzammar’s assistance in the blight.”

The guard observed a corner of the ancient treaties and waved them aside to a podium. “That seal will need to be verified by the Assembly.” He opened a cabinet in the podium to take out a metal stylus and an honest-to-Maker *Magna Doodle*. “You’re allowed entry into Orzammar. I need the size of your party and a list of names.”

While Elissa shared the information, it was Carver’s turn to gape. Of course; Orzammar didn’t have ready access to trees or reeded plants for paper or papyrus, and Carver had no idea if nuggets were a budget source for parchment. What Orzammar *did* have in abundance were minerals and brilliant minds. Rather than produce and waste tonnes of paper and ink, why wouldn’t they produce and *reuse* electrophoretic displays? The way the guard behaved, it was also probably common sense among Orzammar dwarves to keep magnets away from “drawing boards” lest they damage the information contained inside.

In which case, did Orzammar have abundant access to lodestones — minerals that had been near the surface where lightning could strike, then brought underground by the tectonic collision that had formed the Frostbacks? Given the presence of compasses in Thedas, it reasoned to say that someone somewhere had to have discovered magnetism first.

Carver wanted to flick his own forehead. Ferelden was the least developed nation in Thedas. Along with *someone else’s* presumptions, Carver hadn’t considered that an isolated underground kingdom leading the equivalent of the oil market could colour outside mediaeval lines. He had forgotten that, while separated from Orzammar by entire eras, the Sha-Brytol had developed *repeating firearms*.

After the border guard took down everyone's names, Orzammar's heavy stone doors were pulled open just for the party and they were permitted down a stretch of stairs. Mounted torches upon tiled walls filled their path with light.

Elissa whipped her gaze to Carver as they descended. "Mother kicker."

Carver blinked rapidly. "Uh...."

"You orchestrated this, didn't you!" Elissa burst with realisation. "You timed our arrival well enough that we'd be mistaken for Duncan's 'substitutes' – and with ancient treaties, Orzammar would *have* to listen. They wouldn't be able to turn us away without at least hearing our request first! Oh. Knowledge of Orzammar's communities...you even *knew* we were going to *enter* Orzammar!"

Faren side-eyed her. "Aren't ya jumping to conclusions?"

Carver sighed in relief that someone agreed.

Alistair chuckled. "How did Carver know Duncan had intended to come here searching for the archdemon? And after recruiting Faren, had abandoned the search?"

Carver shook his head. "This is all just a coincidence. Why don't we appreciate that we're the first foreigners beyond politicians to enter Orzammar in a long time?"

The stairs ended, and the hallway opened up to a vast floorplan not unlike a cathedral's interior, with lobbies, open chambers, and radiating chapels stretching out in all directions. Coffered and barrel vault ceilings, symmetrical pillar arrangements, and duplicate steps lent an infinite illusion as one walked, as if they were inside a house of mirrors. Quiet lava waterfalls lit each chamber, and towering statues of dwarves more intricately carved than the border doors stood everywhere. Each statue bore a brazier, tool, weapon, or torch that was aflame and coordinated with the lavafalls to evenly light up the space in dusk.

The Hall of Heroes.

Orzammar's record of living ancestors.

Morrigan scoffed at Carver. "You have been drooling since that guard's writing slate."

“Lavafalls,” Carver murmured, drawing near one. “How do they prevent erosion over time...?”

Sten grabbed the back of his collar. “We have no time for delay.”

Faren clapped Carver’s butt. “Let’s go, nerd.”

## Chapter End Notes

Carver’s deathblow against Flemeth is based on the DAO [deathblow animation](#).

I know that lava is above-ground, and magma is underground. I just like how “lava” rolls off the tongue easier, hehe.

# Drunk

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Orzammar was a stretch of ornate structures and palaces that nearly seemed to never end, until in the misty distance one could make out the kingdom funnelling down into a lava pit. From the centre rose a coliseum connected to the kingdom's middle layer of buildings by a six-point star of bridges. A cavernous ceiling of rock rose high above everything, easily lost to the naked eye save for where lava trickled down its sides, lending an illusion of twinkling stars and distantly frozen lightning. Like any cave system large enough, Orzammar appeared to appreciate its own weather system — except instead of being ruled by water, it was ruled by *lyrium dust*.

Which could condense in the perfect environment afforded by Orzammar's ceiling, fall as a light sprinkle, then be carried away by lava to where it would cool, forming rock. With Orzammar's constant mining, lyrium dust was always returning to the air to continue the cycle. Dwarves were immune to lyrium's worst effects regardless, though the few who possessed a weaker constitution appeared to suffer from the equivalent of a pollen allergy. Only unsafe mining practices and directly inhaling a snuff of lyrium risked one's health. Orzammar's dwarves had learned to predict their weather to a pinpoint degree, and assured the warden's party that as foreigners with zero resistance, they wouldn't need umbrellas for forty days.

No wonder dwarves who moved to the surface lost their resistance to lyrium over time. They weren't being regularly exposed to it in this naturally less harmful manner.

Carver could spend *weeks* describing Orzammar. For brevity, he could erroneously compare the kingdom to a work of art, if art was a thought captured in one medium.

Every inch of Orzammar breathed with the thoughts of *generations*.

The architect caste lovingly carved their respect to the Stone into even the top of their structure's pillars where no one would look. The painters' caste delicately brought life to the carvings, ceilings, and even corners where no one would pass with a torch, just because it was the painters' honour to represent their ancestors' skill. The

weavers' caste spun and sewed the full breadth of their pride into textiles they were privileged for the upper castes to wear and display, and practised their nimble hands on cloth for their fellow castes.

The smith caste had its own micro communities worthy of entire books. Weapon smiths were *always* trying to outdo the armour smiths, whether in intricate design or in refined balance. Both were constantly competing against the tool smiths, who were safely in demand for existing tools and for new inventions. Paragon Branka was the latest example of how often the tool smiths were recognised and elevated by the Assembly.

The warrior caste refined *generations* of martial practice into a physical art with deadly precision. All castes below them scrambled for the honour to have their services used by this caste — even the washers caste — for the same reason the painters would work where no one could see. To handle the linens of a warrior family was the highlight of a family's history.

The castes that contributed to the Shaperate were often the same that handled enchantments, writing slates, and tiling. No fault could be found in the mechanisms that allowed for smokeless heat or efficient cooling; even where writing was to be found, only perfect script graced one's eyes. Rich dwarven history also blanketed all of Orzammar in stunning mosaics, such that it felt a sin to step anywhere — though Orzammar's citizens easily passed where they wished and set up stalls as they pleased.

And spilled blood where they felt like it.

"The ancestors will know who is the true king!" a warrior spat.

The warden's party stared at a recent clash between dwarves dissipated, leaving two fresh corpses with weapons behind.

A nearby guard gestured. "Sorry about that. Politics."

Alistair showed him the ancient treaties. "Would you mind showing the way to the Assembly?"

The guard shared the directions with them. "Good luck getting in, though. The Assembly is closed until the next king is decided, and as you've seen, no one can agree on who."

"King Endrin has retired?" Elissa asked.

“Passed to the Stone weeks ago,” the guard said. “The loss of his two oldest children had struck him hard. Now his last living son and his chief advisor are claiming the crown.”

Wynne tilted her head. “I thought royal rule was inherited.”

“Which is why Prince Bhelen has traditionalists supporting him,” the guard confirmed. “However, Lord Harrowmont spread word that the king in his last breath had condemned his youngest and named Harrowmont his successor. Prince Bhelen’s critics have taken the opportunity to support someone who can kick Prince Bhelen out of influence for good.”

“This is worse than Redcliffe,” Alistair realised with horror. “Curing Arl Eamon with a myth and a prayer now feels like child’s play.”

“There’s a blight above ground,” Elissa emphasised. “The Assembly must honour its word as Orzammar does its ancestors.”

Unfortunately, the Assembly wasn’t moved. The warden’s party caught Orzammar’s deshyrs leaving the chamber for their daily recess, and each noble confirmed that they would be more than happy to swear their house’s arms to the cause *after* a king had been crowned. The Seconds, or right hands, of both candidates had then approached the party suggesting that with the Grey Wardens’ assistance, they could tip the scales and have a new king decided quickly. In return, the wardens could expect solid support.

“The Assembly already promises such support,” Carver intervened before Elissa could swear anything. “Think about it. We gain nothing from helping either candidate.”

The warden’s party collapsed into an array of benches in a plaza. Elissa watched Dog play with passing children. “What should we do, then? The noble caste has perfected generations of wordsmithing to the point that they can talk in circles for *weeks*.”

“While you guys debate that,” Faren hopped off his bench, “I’m gonna check on my sister.”

Oh, here they went.

Carver stood up. “I regret saying this, but it’s time to take a page from Morrigan’s book.”

Everyone followed with interest. The witch smirked. “Oh?”

Carver led Faren and the rest in the direction of the royal palace. “We’re going to blackmail both candidates, and support the one who has the most to offer.”

Prince Bhelen’s Second, a noble named Vartag, had earlier suggested to the warden’s party to expose a real-estate scam that Harrowmont was using to gain Assembly votes. Nothing public, Vartag had detailed; he had merely provided documented proof for the party to show the scam’s victims, and said that privately revealing the dishonesty to Harrowmont’s targets was a kindness in itself that Bhelen would recognise. When Faren had implied that the documents could be forged, Vartag had neutrally shrugged. If the warden’s party wanted to meet Bhelen in person, they would have to curry his favour, first.

However, when the warden’s party approached the royal palace, they were inexplicably rushed in to meet Bhelen, a youthful adult who bore chiselled, symmetrical features from centuries of fine breeding. His long blonde beard was beaded and woven such that, like the Hall of Heroes, it seemed to reveal new symmetry at different angles. When he ran a jewelled hand down his beard, he dazzled. It seemed that even weeks after his father’s passing, the prince still made the effort to royally groom himself.

Between the prince’s appearance and his Second’s behaviour, it was a surprise when Bhelen embraced Faren on sight, nearly picking him up off his feet.

“Brother-in-law!” Bhelen looked like a child, his eyes alight. He kissed Faren on the cheeks. “Oh, you look just like Rica. With the ancestors’ blessing, my son will as well!”

Faren stammered. “Uh.”

“Your Highness,” Elissa began, but Bhelen wrapped an arm around Faren as if she wasn’t there.

“You haven’t been able to meet our son yet, have you?” Bhelen directed them to a hall.

Faren looked at him, puzzled. “I was on the surface.”

Even Vartag stepped in from the side. “Bhelen, we risk the young prince’s safety by bringing a...*stranger* to his room.”

“This is Rica’s brother,” Bhelen addressed someone outside of Faren

for the first time. When he wasn't smiling, the dwarves around him suddenly shrank. "By our laws, he is also mine. Come, Faren."

Faren dug his heels into the ground, halting Bhelen. "Hold on. Rica can't be your wife, she's – I'm – *casteless*, and I've been to the surface. Left the Stone, and all that."

"My amber rose bore me a son." Bhelen wasn't fazed by Faren's words. "I have taken her and her blood into my house. More than that, Faren, I aim to change the boundaries of our caste system once I become king. I will instantly take Rica as my wife where, be they sons or daughters, I will claim our present and future children into my lineage. May the Stone hold record. This is the little I can do to show how much Rica deserves to be venerated."

"Rica wasn't kidding," Faren spoke in shock. "She *was* safe with you."

At that, Bhelen's eyes subtly dimmed. "Ah. Well, her 'aunt' and I have an understanding."

"Aunt...You mean Jarvia?" Faren deduced. He shook free of Bhelen's arm. "She has taken over the Carta? And you—"

"Used them," Carver finished.

Bhelen looked his way for the first time, and Carver felt his heart lodge up his throat and hide there from the weight behind the prince's gaze. No wonder the prince was as loved as he was feared. He *exuded* authority.

Carver swallowed. "Faren, after your sister bore a noble's son, your former gang *would* take the opportunity to elevate themselves. However, even they can't forge their way into a royal family without Rica's cooperation, and why would she grant it after their treatment of you? So Prince Bhelen cast a hook. Gave them conditions."

Zevran caught on. "Discourage warriors from representing Harrowmont in the Provings."

Morrigan hummed. "Plant evidence against your enemies."

Carver nodded. "And when the Carta demands for what they've been convinced they're owed...you cleanse Orzammar of a criminal syndicate."

Bhelen turned their way. "That would be quite the plot."



“Dust Town,” Carver stated. “There’s a slum house that conceals an entry to the true Carta hideout. A bone key and password is required to enter. Evidence of your plots all the way back to your second oldest brother’s fate can be found there.”

Bhelen laced his fingers in front of himself. “You’re blackmailing me.”

“Negotiating,” Carver allowed. “Lord Harrowmont’s weakness or your dishonesty; either would be easy to publicise as a neutral and trustworthy third party. The inheritance debate would be over quickly, and the Grey Wardens would receive the dwarven support they’re owed.”

Bhelen stroked his beard. “What stays your hand?”

Carver replied evenly. “The benefits.”

Vartag spluttered. “What has Lord Harrowmont promised that Prince Bhelen can’t surpass!?”

Morrigan was starting to have fun. “Is that not for us to know?”

Elissa and Alistair whiplashed between both sides.

Bhelen spread his palms out. “Soldier of Maric’s Shield. What can I do for you?”

Of course the prince would recognise certain armour. Carver passively gestured. “State your platform.”

Bhelen shrugged. “The ends justify the means. I wish to loosen restrictions against trade and relations with the surface, and allow casteless dwarves to fight in the Deep Roads. Those who prove themselves against darkspawn may be temporarily elevated to the warrior caste in return. It’s time that Orzammar reclaims lost thaigs, and I won’t let our outdated system hinder us.”

Considering the reverence given to the warrior caste, it was a miracle that any traditionalists supported Bhelen at all. The end result was an otherwise impossible mix of traditionalists and progressives supporting a politically savvy young man still in his thirties.

Who was smitten with Faren’s sister, and whom Carver had fabricated blackmail over.

Carver turned to Elissa. “You’ve heard Harrowmont’s platform from

his Second.”

The young Cousland blinked. “Honourable conduct above all else. Lord Harrowmont is a strong proponent of tradition and prefers isolationism. What are you getting at?”

“Harrowmont and his supporters root themselves in transparency,” Carver replied, “but pulling Prince Bhelen’s true feelings out of him is like pulling teeth. To keep him honest, one must apply blackmail.”

Sten grumbled. “All this just for a handful of words?”

Carver nodded. “If you could demand someone to speak truly and without omission, wouldn’t you do it? I prefer blackmail over torture.”

Zevran falsely gasped.

Alistair actually gasped. “Blood and ashes, doesn’t Maric’s Shield have *age limits* to their activities!?”

Carver needed to believably possess blackmail over Bhelen even after everyone had time to reflect on the moment. Exaggeration was necessary. He would correct Alistair’s assumption later. “Warden Elissa, the decision is yours. You’ve heard what Lord Harrowmont has to offer to us. Is Prince Bhelen’s transparency sufficiently superior?”

“Wait,” Bhelen cut in. “Let it be known that I value my allies. I offer three relics of my family: the Aeducan mace, my late brother Trian’s mace, and my late brother Duren’s axe.”

Harrowmont and his supporters hadn’t offered the party anything, or even been confronted with the same blackmailing scheme as Carver was conducting. Yet already, Bhelen was competing against an invisible offer. When dwarven servants retrieved the relics from the royal vault, Carver nearly went cross-eyed at the buffing and detail in them. There was no question the smith caste had poured their all into the works. The weapons could probably balance on a coin’s edge.

Elissa sharply exhaled. She understood that in some noble houses, such a gift would be received as a family heirloom. Bhelen was offering them *three*.

“The Wardens need all the help we can get,” Elissa decided, “casteless or not. Isolationism won’t help us. Here starts a relationship between the Aeducans and the Wardens *without any deceit*. ...May the Stone hold record.”

Bhelen nodded and, like a switch was flipped, tugged Faren over to the royal chambers. “Come, come, you must see your nephew!”

The rest of the party waited in a palace drawing room, some of them visibly reeling at what had just transpired. Carver massaged his temples as he leaned forward on his knees. Since he had detected the blight early, King Endrin had passed only recently and Bhelen’s heir was only days old. They were a few months ahead of schedule which was...good? It was still disheartening that Carver couldn’t have prevented the royal family’s fall and the fight for the crown. Vartag was correct to be concerned for the newborn prince’s safety given that Bhelen’s enemies within Harrowmont’s party weren’t above assassination.

Should Carver provide indirect support? Unfortunately, he didn’t have access to a highway network in Orzammar like he did above ground.

There were still people to help, though.

Zevran caught Carver as he stood up. “Where to? I’m bored.”

Wynne rose as well. “I could eat a little.”

Shale lumbered over. “I want to play with more squishies.”

The golem had been enjoying shocking the common public. Random old ladies stumbled back from the sight of her. Dwarves from the smith caste fainted in admiration. Apparently, the sparingly few golems that Orzammar had were maintained as museum artefacts in the Diamond Quarter, their command rods hidden in storage so that the golems could never be used.

One of such golems hadn’t moved from the Diamond Quarter street corner it had been at when the preservation of Ancient age relics had been decreed. Speaking to the golem was like interacting with a street camera; perfect memory of its surroundings, no personality. Members of the Shaperate had thus dogged Shale’s steps all the way to the royal palace’s front door in an effort to record Shale’s attitude. What Shale liked most was the mining caste adorning her in vibrant crystals.

Carver looked to the rest of the party, who dismissed him for the opportunity to rest their feet or to discuss distribution of the three relics. Decided, Carver headed out, followed by Zevran, Wynne, and Shale.

The four of them spent most of the day performing odd jobs. Well, the

three of them; Shale was just happy to follow Carver through all three levels of the kingdom and catch as many eyes as possible. Wynne tasted dwarven snacks and ale in the common market while Carver haggled for potion ingredients. When they bumped into an herbalist treating a patient in the royal palace, Wynne used the herbalist's recipe and Carver's ingredients to make an antidote, to which the herbalist profusely thanked them. The herbalist later found them to share that his patient, Lady Brodens, was offering a friendship with her house in gratitude. When Carver refused to accept, Wynne and Zevran accepted for him.

They also bumped into a dwarven Andrastian who wished to establish a Chantry in Orzammar. When they visited the Shaperate to negotiate on his behalf, a shaper assistant begged them to hunt down a tome thief and return the tome to him. They tracked the thief down to the Provings coliseum, where Zevran easily snuck in and returned with the tome and news that the violent thief had handed the book...over his dead body. The shaper assistant and his mentor were content to permit a Chantry.

As the party moved for Dust Town, a little dwarven girl named Dagna beseeched them to help her gain permission to study in the Circle. Wynne was charmed and impressed by the pigtailed genius, and wrote the entry documents herself as Kinloch Hold's First Enchanter. Dagna gleefully went off to pack up and leave for the Circle. In Dust Town, a lyrium smuggler attempted to recruit their help, only for Wynne to vehemently reject him. The smuggler responded violently and died a natural death by golem.

Finally, Carver answered a beggar woman's open hand with gold, surprising her story out of her. The party convinced the woman's noble father to take her back – along with her casteless baby – or else the woman and her baby would die of illness in the slums. The family reunited in Tapster's Tavern, where Carta agents ambushed the party. The four of them cleared the gangsters out, then tracked down the tunnel network that was the Carta hideout. Flushed by the strongest of dwarven alcohols, Wynne charged in with stone fists, Shale cackling after her. Carver managed to knock out and capture a certain gangster named Leske before the dwarf could join his brethren as a stain on the ground.

Faren, Elissa, and the rest eventually found the four of them executing a drinking contest in Tapster's Tavern, a bruised Leske tied up next to them and cheerful dwarves paying for their drinks.

Alistair gaped. “What in Andraste’s name!?”

Carver looked over the pyramid of flagons he was building with one hand, while his other hand tipped beer into his throat. He hadn’t had the chance to recreationally drink since he had been a full-grown adult with disposable income.

Sten reached under the table and picked up a giggling Zevran.

Elissa pinched her nose. “Have you been *drinking!*?”

Morrigan lifted her chin at the pyramid. “And winning, it seems.”

Carver drained his flagon and set it down next to the pyramid with two other empty flagons. “No, this is all Wynne’s.” He hiccuped. “I’m losing.”

Faren looked around the pyramid to see Wynne outpacing a heavy-set dwarf drink for drink. The dwarf’s friends had quickly picked up on Carver’s structure and were building their own pyramid. It was two flagons less than Wynne’s pyramid.

Faren whistled. “Have you been drinking *all day?*”

Leske snorted from where he sat tied to a chair. “They had the decency to only be a little tipsy when they wiped us out.”

Faren stilled at the sight of his friend. “...Us.”

Leske sneered. “You’ve forgotten how it works down here, *friend*. When Jarvia—”

Faren didn’t wait past the Carta leader’s name to break Leske’s nose with his fist. “You *nug humper!*”

Leske fell back from the blow and hit a flushed patron in mid-drink. The patron turned and punched the closest dwarf.

“*Bar fiiiiiight!*” Someone cried out.

X

The warden’s party entered the Deep Roads in silence. Carver popped his neck with a wince. Three days of rest hadn’t been enough to recover from...That Incident. On the upside, Wynne had expanded her horizons and acquired a taste for dwarven ale. On the downside...she had acquired a taste for dwarven ale. It was a black substance

ostensibly undrinkable for anyone not a dwarf. Carver had been proud he had managed to down three glasses of it until the side-effects had hit. Now he inwardly gagged whenever Wynne remarked that she hoped to drink it again soon.

"I can't believe you got banned from a dwarven tavern," Elissa muttered, breaking the silence.

Zevran playfully sniffed. "What were *you* doing while we were being so productive?"

Faren adjusted the two relics strapped to his sides. "Revealing a scam for my sister's lover."

"That isn't the point," Alistair spluttered. "The four of you stole into the Provings arena, introduced religion, shipped a little dwarven girl off to the Circle, and *wiped out a criminal syndicate* on a drunken rampage!? Then brought a gangster back for Faren to *execute*!?"

"Dwarven custom," Faren defended. "Leske had been all but family. He had the right to justify his actions before I could decide his fate."

*"You punched his face in!"*

Carver hid a guilty wince. Assigned with Shielder armour and armed with a sword he had sworn a vow to, Carver was moving past his desire to pass unnoticed. Not while he was on a mission. Still — the first time he was starting to open up to people, they had turned Orzammar's social network on its head. Someone else didn't think of themselves as chaotic.

They *weren't*.

Aside, Oghren nudged Sten. "How did you get Prince Duren's axe?"

The last relic was strapped to Sten, given no one else knew how to wield the two-handed weapon. The qunari pointed at Oghren. "Karasten. You forgot to leave this flagon behind at the tavern."

Oghren guffawed while Elissa and Alistair groaned. If the dwarf had chosen to sober up for a day, he would have found a way to steal into the Deep Roads and suicidally search for his ex-wife, Paragon Branka. Instead, the unarmed alcoholic had intercepted the warden's party at the guarded gate for the Deep Roads and demanded he join them. When Carver had voted in Oghren's favour, it had been the first time that Elissa and Alistair hadn't readily agreed with him.

It could have been Carver's lack of focus. Or the fact that he had only shed his social awkwardness with beer-soaked dwarves. Elissa and Alistair didn't want Carver to grow comfortable with such a crowd.

Morrigan gestured. "You might as well give him the axe. No one else is using it. The dwarf is dead weight otherwise."

Elissa immediately recoiled. "You want to give a *family heirloom* to a ——" She hastily caught herself.

Sten glanced at Carver, then slowly passed the relic to Oghren. "Ashkost say hissa."

"You know what is the point?" Faren blurted, swivelling his head to Carver. "You. You knew of Prince Bhelen and Rica somehow. Oh this all makes sense! You wouldn't use your contacts in Orzammar to run a background check on a former *gangster*." He gestured at himself, then to the axe that Oghren gleefully strapped to his back. "You wanted to know about the royal family!"

Carver replied non sequitur, "When Ferelden's king performs stately visits, Maric's Shield fills his security detail."

Faren grumbled. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Morrigan scoffed. "It means Carver does not have friends in Orzammar. He just deduces these things."

"Nug's piss," Faren called.

"Maferath's trousers," Alistair agreed.

Dog barked.

"Are you children done?" Wynne scolded. "We have a dwarven inventor to find and bring back home. Then maybe our words as a neutral third-party will finally bear some weight."

Zevran jibed, "Maybe Rica's lover is using us to prove his platform."

Wynne frowned. "Maybe we should address Prince Bhelen by name properly."

"Woah," Oghren coughed and corked something in his hands. "Prince Pretty Boy is dating your sister?"

Alistair's nose wrinkled at Oghren's breath. "You brought a wineskin

to the Deep Roads?”

“They aren’t dating,” Faren morosely corrected. “They’re ‘two as one, solid as rock.’”

“Faren is an uncle,” Carver murmured.

“Well, congratulations!” Oghren lumbered over to Faren and raised his wineskin. “Drink up!”

Elissa and Alistair immediately intervened. “**No!**”

X

A stucco terrace, soft and willowy curtains, and an orchestra of flowery scents carried by a breeze; this was the natural setting for a graceful, dainty woman dripping in crystals and satin. In comparison, her gloved fingers bore the faintest traces of ink as she delicately cut a knife through paper. Her gaze remained focused even as a flurry of voices rose ahead of her, before finally the doors to her study flew open like lightning. Heeled boots followed like thunder.

“*Celene!*” a thin-haired man roared.

Hunched bodies hastily closed the doors behind him.

The woman in question didn’t lift her golden mask. “You embarrassed yourself, cousin.”

Gaspard de Chalons hissed at the ceramic lion pointed at a letter opener rather than his own lion mask. “How was I supposed to know that the Fereldens were too stupid to be manipulated?”

Celene’s glossed lips quirked. “By exchanging letters with their queen. Her Majesty Anora proves a stimulating pen pal.”

Gaspard threw his hands up in the air. “Your libido knows no bounds! Is this why you reject every portrait I send you?”

Celene at last raised her head to watch her cousin pace her study. “Have some confidence in yourself, Gaspard. I typically find myself already acquainted with a few people among the portraits you regularly send me before I receive them. It would just be in poor taste to play favourites.”

Gaspard shot her a look. “Hurry up and get married.”



Celene elegantly sniffed. “You first.”

A particular choice of words commanded one’s impression as reins did a horse. Brush the beast’s hair, primp it a little, and a horse could become a woman’s mount. Celene had captivated the loyalty of many houses this way while evading marriage – and, more importantly, keeping true to Briala.

Did Celene share intimate relations with women of influential standing? Only so far as social flirting went. Heterosexual relationships were an expectation strictly among nobility where bloodlines mattered, and indeed this was a norm shared with most of Thedas’s powerful countries. The convention ultimately applied at the altar, however, and while the burden grew heavier as one was closer to the crown, Celene’s rumoured dating habits merely stirred society.

Romancing an elf crossed the invisible line.

Dreaming of marrying an elf, more so.

Which was why, if Celene had to navigate around Orlais’ patriarchal culture just to push change where needed, she was going to poke at men’s confidence where she could. Her female friends were smoke and mirrors concealing the true direction of Celene’s affections. If Celene couldn’t hide the fact that she preferred women, she wouldn’t imply she *wasn’t* interested in men. She just chose not to flirt with any, lest they leap to the idea of marriage. All the while, Celene could remain close with her lover.

Over the course of their letters, Queen Anora had begun to reveal her opinion of noble expectations. Bloodline held weight insofar a family’s character could be proven reliable, and did not a family’s own conduct speak for itself? Anora only lamented that she had no relatives whose child she could raise as her own. The Ferelden monarch was perhaps one of few whom Celene could genuinely consider a friend. The contents of their letters were easily scandalous, and thus were only handled by those they could fiercely trust: Briala’s spy network, and Lady Oriana’s merchant family. Of course, a good friend didn’t translate to an agreeable politician, but still.

Celene had been advocating greater diversity in Orlais’ academic and art institutions, allowing even elven admittance on account they had a noble’s support. Her efforts were gaining traction. With support from Ferelden’s monarchy, could Celene even...?

She had always been ambitious.

Ever since she was sixteen years old.

## Chapter End Notes

The last bit with Celene is a quick glimpse of the changes rippling throughout Thedas from outside of Carver's POV. Of course, I still plan to write other characters' POVs on Carver as well, teehee. Thank you everyone for your support!

According to dialogue with Oghren, Orzammar has golems. However, the golems are likely small in number, have limited interaction with castes at the warrior level and below, or both, since Oghren had only encountered one or two golems in all his years in Orzammar. Most intriguing is what Oghren comments about his experience:

*"I talked to a golem once. It didn't have anything interesting to say... But its memory? Sharp. It could tell you what you were wearing at the Barnack festival ten years ago."*

I didn't know how an Orzammar dwarf of the warrior caste couldn't have more than one opportunity to talk to a relic that could apparently attend festivals. My solution was to make golems exclusively accessible in the Diamond Quarter, where only noble castes reside, yet also make them as forgettable as a street camera. Given Oghren's history of having been kicked out of the royal palace many times in his petition to search for Branka, it makes sense he would encounter one or two golems at one point.

# Prey

## Chapter Notes

Welcome to the Deep Roads, where everything sucks. Please bear with me through this chapter of the party's journey, and thank you for supporting this fic!

They were starting to stretch out their rations. The Deep Roads was a rat's maze. Carver never thought he'd say it, but,

Thank the *Maker* for Oghren.

The red-bearded dwarf had rescued the warden's party from wandering the Aeducan Thaig in circles for two weeks. Slurringly drunk, Oghren could still navigate Orzammar's closest abandoned thaig like the back of his hand. He had been a warrior celebrity back in the day and had killed so many darkspawn, it had been reduced to a sport to him in the past. However, the misfortunes he had experienced since then were now drowning the fallen dwarf in booze. Harrowmont supporters had ambushed the party at one point in the thaig, jeering at Oghren's fate as they had attacked.

Oghren had shoved an axe up their rears.

Literally. Oghren had split them open a second mouth with one bloody swing. Sten had finished them off with another.

The party's luck didn't last long. Once they had left for uncharted lands, every ruined bridge and stack of stairs began to look the same. Even when Dog marked their path, they had to turn around a dozen times, start counting holes on walls, and debate if they had encountered *this* infestation of spiders before. Carver had unashamedly fainted the first time he had encountered a giant spider. He hadn't caught sleep for the next three days. Now whenever he lied down with everyone for the night, his skin would crawl like a sprout of rashes up his spine.

Leading to the party's current state: twitchy, half-blind in darkness, and two months into their rations.

Two *months*.

Only Shale, Oghren, Faren, and Sten seemed to be handling

themselves well. Shale in fact began to express more familiarity with their ruined surroundings, between her dry or indifferent comments. The dwarves of the party were fortunately resilient to the depressing conditions, and qunari were built to handle a lack of food and water for weeks, to say nothing of Sten's mentality.

As the journey stretched on, however, it truly grew difficult when party tempers began to flare under the stress. Elissa, Alistair, and Faren began tossing in their sleep, waking up frequently under the shadow of the archdemon. Faren's description of the fallen god grew increasingly detailed the deeper they travelled into the earth. The dwarf had never "dreamt" before. And when the wardens couldn't sleep, no one else could. Dividing nightly watches became a spark for arguments, then whose weapon cleaning tools someone could borrow, until everyone eventually retreated into silence.

Alistair, Zevran, Sten, and Carver's experience in the dizzying Brecilian Forest at least managed to curb their first instincts, despite Alistair's lack of sleep. They couldn't afford to lose control in a treacherous place. However, while the party couldn't avoid each other, Sten ramped up Carver's training with Summer Sword. Environmental disadvantages against greatswords couldn't be an excuse not to wield one efficiently. Sten and Carver coordinated to find the "surgeon-like" style that Carver deduced would best suit him. Zevran meanwhile helped Faren learn to dual-wield his two maces, and Alistair shared with Morrigan what he could recall of Arcane Warriors.

Training together seemed to be the only solution the party could find against their fraying camaraderie.

Halfway through their third month, the party stumbled upon a latticework of bridges and stone pulley systems that Oghren deciphered as Caridin's Cross. The network resembled a vertical highway, and bioluminescent moss revealed that the crossing took up as much space as a skyscraper, *easily*. Carver had seen similar pulley systems in Orzammar commanded by a lever on a platform. In a certain timeline where a group of people travelled as deep as a Titan's heart, multiple levels of even wider platforms were also utilised.

The large platform pulley was essentially an open elevator. According to Faren's experience in Soldier's Peak, surfacers believed that the system only worked for dwarves since they didn't have wind and rain underground. There was no risk of being thrown off the elevator. Orzammar had readily believed the idea given the kingdom's

superstitions about the sky. It was unfortunate, but reasonable.

Until Carver felt like Morrigan was going to tear his arm off.

“We’ll be fine,” Carver murmured as everyone stepped onto a platform.

“If man were meant to fly,” Morrigan hissed, “he would be capable of shape-shifting.”

Carver winced. “Unless you can turn into a dragon small enough to navigate this place, but large enough to carry all of us, then be my guest. Or you can, you know, be less shy about transforming in front of everyone.”

Morrigan pinched him.

Elissa and Alistair were embracing each other tightly and no one was commenting on it. Elissa’s voice shook. “Faren, are you sure this one goes up? Did you read the carvings correctly?”

Faren glanced at her as he moved for the lever. “What do you mean, surfacer? I can’t read dwarven.”

*Click.*

The platform plummeted.

“*Andraste’s flaming tits!*” Elissa screeched as Carver’s stomach lodged up his throat.

Carver fumbled for the lever, but then the platform abruptly staggered to a halt, a distant stone mechanism activated, and the platform lurched horizontally for a new direction. Wind whipped through everyone’s hair. Someone’s torch went out. Dog gleefully barked. Eventually, the platform slowed to a crawl and parked before a stone plaza, where everyone stumbled to solid ground.

Caridin had been a true genius to invent a multi-directional elevator. No wonder the ancient dwarf had earned the title of Paragon.

Carver still mentally cursed him.

Alistair shakily pointed at Oghren, the only one among them passably literate in dwarven. “From now on...*he’s* in charge.”

The party shuffled through the plaza for a pair of closed doors

guarded by golems. At the break, Oghren took the chance to recover from the hellish elevator and relieve himself on the statues' feet.

The golems activated and came out swinging.

Alistair groaned as he equipped his shield. "I take it back! Veata!"

Elissa shot him a look past her own shield. "Of *all* words to learn—!"

Shale headbutted both golems, stunning them long enough for Wynne to knock one back with a stone fist and Morrigan to encapsulate the other in a flash of ice. The former golem struggled like a turtle on its back, then found purchase on the ground to sit up. Shale punched it back down.

Sten eyed the frozen golem whose icy layer was cracking. "We must wear them out."

Oghren hastily tied his trousers. "Legends say these suckers can go on for years!"

Shale flexed her crystals. "It has noticed that when I spend all my energy, I only need rest before returning to battle."

"The Qun observes strengths and weaknesses," Sten confirmed.

"Shale can fight for hours before tiring," Wynne remarked. "Should we wear these two golems down to unconsciousness, they will eventually reawaken and chase us down, restarting the cycle. We are currently seeking the heart of Paragon Caridin's network where we might find Paragon Branka's research team. Who knows how many more golems we will encounter along the way?"

"In this situation," Morrigan recognised, "we are the prey."

Elissa gripped her shield. "Can we try diplomacy?"

Shale punched the face-up golem back down. "I can do this for hours, so stop struggling. My squishies and I only want to pass."

The golem's shock rumbled out of it. "Thou...Emperor Valtor hath allowed thee speech?"

Oghren choked on his spit. "You're stuck in the Ancient age, stone-britches."

The golem shook its head. "It matters not. Thou wilt nev'r findeth the

Anvil!"

Carver cut in. "*We don't want the Anvil!*"

"I want my ex," Oghren confirmed.

"Recognition," Wynne added.

"Money," Morrigan hoped.

"I'm bored," Shale admitted.

The golem stared up at Shale. "Ye art allowed free will? Why then, sister, would thee help Emperor Valtor findeth the Anvil? Only volunteers shouldst beest allowed to become golems."

"First off," Shale drawled, "there is no emperor. Second, I am no one's *sister*. There is no golem out there like *me*, and I certainly don't know a golem like you. No control rod can contain my free will. I am babysitting these squishies because it amuses me."

The golem slumped on the ground. "Then...the Empire hath ceased preying on casteless, criminals, and political enemies?"

Faren muttered. "I wouldn't say that...."

"Caridin wilt beest reliev'd to hear that," the golem said, sitting up. Shale didn't stop him. "However, those of us loyal to him hadst sworn to nev'r let the Empire useth the Anvil ever again. Thee understandeth."

The other golem suddenly shattered its binds and raised its fists. Everyone hastily backed away from it, only for the first golem to intercede.

"Halt, brother. One of our own is amongst us."

The second golem grumbled, loosening. "Wast thee a volunteer?"

"What is there to understand?" Shale huffed. "What have I to volunteer for? 'Becoming a golem?' I have no such memories."

Both golems reared back. "Time in the darkness hath blurred our memories, but we cannot forget our sacrifice for the Empire in its darkest hour. A menace we anon calleth darkspawn hadst sprouted deep in the earth, ravaging our cities. Only by volunteering our lives to animate golems hath't we did make shift the darkspawn back.

Sister, it is a waste to spendeth thy efforts against thy fellow dwarves. Tell us; hath the Empire returned the Legion of Steel to the front lines against darkspawn?"

Even Shale quieted. "You speak of the First Blight. According to these squishies, that had ended more than a thousand years ago with the loss of all thaigs except Orzammar and Kal-Sharok. Dwarves are split between two kingdoms. The world is now into its Fifth Blight."

The two golems froze, stunned. For a moment, it seemed they had shut down.

Alistair winced. "Perhaps we should have shared the news gently?"

Oghren gestured to Shale. "Sounds like you were a dwarf."

"A volunteer..." Shale murmured, voice drifting, "in a legion of golems...."

"Golems are dwarves," Elissa realised with horror. "You're saying the Anvil of the Void had been used to create weapons out of — *people!*"

The two golems stood up and straightened, parting the stone doors behind them. "Wend see Caridin. Allow him to shed light on thy history with the Empire. Shouldst thee encounter more of our kind, declare yourself cousin and ally of House Ortan."

The party gathered themselves and passed through the doorway, after which the two golems closed the doors shut. Relighting a torch revealed a corridor that was triple in height and width as the earlier golems. Unlike Shale, the golems had never been shaved down to be able to fit through human doorways. The corridor resembled an underground highway.

"House Ortan," Shale muttered, chasing after a memory.

"It doesn't exist," Oghren commented. "I'm a warrior caste. I know my houses."

"I'm still processing who we just talked to," Elissa confessed, "what we just heard. They say museums bring history to life, but I doubt anyone expects *that* when traversing the Deep Roads. Shale, if you need a moment to yourself, feel free to take it. I know this must come as a shock."

"I was a dwarf," Shale said.



Elissa nodded. “Exactly.”

“I was...squishy.”

Oghren roared with laughter. “You’re as old as dirt!”

Elissa hissed. “Not helping, Oghren!”

Shale turned to Carver. “Did it know?”

Carver raised the torch in his hand. “How could I? The Shaperate has no record of dwarven sacrifices behind the creation of golems.”

Shale corrected herself. “Did it deduce this?”

Carver shot Morrigan a look at her influence, then sighed. “The Shaperate lacks complete genealogical records for Emperor Valtor’s era. More births are recorded than deaths. Even those who had disappeared in the Deep Roads during combat against darkspawn are at least written as missing in action. Given the cultural age of adulthood for the times, the gap in the Shaperate’s records primarily affects dwarves who would have been legally independent. Not all dwarves were of the warrior caste. Significant gaps in later records suggest that entire houses have been and can be erased.”

Zevran spluttered. “When did you have time to read all that?”

Carver shrugged. “When we visited the Shaperate. There was a warrior caste girl there who was researching her family history. Her material suggests there is documented proof she comes from a noble lineage, however she isn’t of age to take up weapons and scour the Deep Roads for it.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire. Carver had never read anything, but he had a torch to hide his tell. He *had* met a warrior girl and listened to her plight.

“That’s how it is, then?” Alistair concluded. “With no end to the blight in sight, Emperor Valtor had begun *forcing* dwarves into becoming golems. Paragon Caridin had learned of it and protested, resulting in the erasure of his and his allies’ houses. The golems whom Caridin had freed of control had then...taken him and the Anvil to the Deep Roads to be forever lost? The two golems earlier were still speaking as if Paragon Caridin is alive!”

“Made into a golem by the emperor,” Elissa caught on, biting her lip.

“Betrayed by someone he had trusted. Emperor Valtor should’ve had *his* house erased instead.”

“So the golems earlier were of House Ortan?” Oghren guessed. “What about you, stone-britches? That name stir any dust?”

“Only Shale,” came the reply. “I can’t forget — it — it’s *important*. Shale.” She turned to Carver. “Did it pass the name Shale in its readings?”

Carver gently confessed, “Shale is a common name with many derivatives.”

Faren grumbled. “We don’t even know if those stone giants were speaking the truth, or remember the past properly. I *can* believe that the casteless were used and discarded a thousand years ago like they are today.”

Wynne nodded. “Though not everyone in a caste appears to think that way. Prince Bhelen is an easy example. Paragon Caridin sacrificed his family and his own body defending the casteless, along with Caridin’s supporters.”

Sten spoke up. “That detail irks me. If this Paragon and his allies had fled to the Deep Roads to hide the Anvil, would not a number of them choose to eventually pass away, as all things of nature do? For these golems to instead stand as statues when inactive, they have not found a means to eternal rest.”

Zevran groaned. “You mean to say that even golems don’t know how to kill a golem? Surely there must be a pool of lava somewhere.”

Oghren uncorked his wineskin. “Or they fear death outside of combat.”

Zevran snorted. “Well they won’t find luck with us, unless our dear Carver has a solution.”

Carver moaned. “I don’t have the answer to everything!”

Alistair perked up. “Have you at least gleaned if what the golems said was true?”

“...The warrior girl I met in the Shaperate,” Carver reluctantly mentioned. “Her name is Orta. She shares her name with a woman in each generation of her matriarchal lineage. She believes that her name

derives from a matriarchal ancestor.”

“A Paragon,” Oghren spoke through a swig of alcohol, “whose descendents had befriended Caridin and mostly become golems. Noble sacrifices—” He burped and recovered. “Hrm. By rights of the ages, that girly is a noble caste!”

Morrigan stepped away from Oghren with disgust. “Our only source of dwarven laws is a drunkard.”

Alistair shivered. “I preferred experiencing history through the gauntlet. The Deep Roads are just...*haunting*.”

Everyone froze when something skittered beyond their torchlight.

Carver’s hair rose.

Elissa equipped her shield just as venom splashed against it. “*Spiders!*”

The party formed up around Zevran as Carver hurriedly passed the torch to him. A cone of fire from Morrigan revealed that spiders were swarming as far down the corridor as one could see. Not an inch of stone was uncovered by hairy legs and beady eyes. The hallway looked like it was alive.

Carver and Sten simultaneously took up a stance.

“Wow, I hate this,” Carver declared, then jabbed forward with Sten.

The party ferociously cut through wave after wave of giant spiders. Zevran nearly singed every party member as he fended off fangs with his sword hand and burned away spiderwebs with his torch hand. Shale channelled her enchanted crystals and threw fire with every punch. Morrigan and Wynne tore through the mob with all four elements, and Elissa and Alistair quickly filled the space to hunker down with their shields and claim it. Sten and Carver defended the rear from ambushes, facing a horde all on their own. Faren, Oghren, and Dog protected everyone’s blind spots.

Room clearing wasn’t an option. This was just a bloody *nightmare*.

It took forever to advance a step, and a step seemed to take forever.

Suddenly, screeching erupted in the distance. As Carver gripped his sword and struggled to catch his breath, the swarm of spiders parted with squeals, quickly racing up the walls to shadowed crevices. Their

retreat echoed through unseen tunnels.

There, down the corridor and at the source of the spiders' fear,

Was a bloody dwarf.

The stranger wiped spider guts off his armour and hauled an axe over his shoulder. "Didn't think I'd see the day when I'd have visitors."

Shale lowered a handful of mountain. "It's talking. I don't think it's a darkspawn."

Elissa was gaping. "Maker — who are you!?"

The stranger removed his helmet revealing an uncannily familiar face. "Duren Aeducan, former prince of Orzammar."

Faren pointed with his mace. "How many dead people are we gonna meet!?"

X

"It is a pleasure to have more company in this darkness," Duren said as he passed roasted deep mushrooms around a campfire. Ruck poked the fire, keeping it alive. "I've introduced my friend and I. May we have your names?"

"Faren," the dwarven rogue shared. "Your brother-in-law."

To Duren's credit, he only paused at Faren's casteless brand before warmly greeting him. "Congratulations, brother. I'm sorry I missed the wedding."

Faren blinked, stunned at the quickly fond address. "Uh, no wedding — my sister is still casteless. Prince Bhelen seems determined to change tradition, though. He was the one to call me brother-in-law."

Duren nodded, his aura dimming. "Indeed, Bhelen will move the mountains themselves to attain his goals."

Faren hesitantly prodded. "He framed you for Prince Trian's death, didn't he."

Duren chuckled. "As I said, goal-oriented. I've had time to come to terms with my new circumstances. I cannot change them, but I can choose to forgive Bhelen in my heart. I have since sworn against violence."

Everyone eyed the exile's bloody armour.

"I will not harm people," Duren elaborated, wiping Ruck's face as the scrawny dwarf ate a mushroom. "I was fortunate to encounter Ruck during my exile in the Deep Roads. He has helped me forage mushrooms and deep stalkers for food, while I protect us from spiders and darkspawn. I suppose after all this time, the spiders have learned not to inconvenience me when I start swinging my axe."

Carver thoughtfully observed the cavern they were secluded in. Deep mushrooms had highly restorative properties, and for their taste were considered a dwarven delicacy. When they weren't roasted or cooked, they could also be applied as a poison, which by the smell of the cavern's entrance was likely Ruck's current form of home defence against spiders and darkspawn. Faren was visibly bewildered by his position, eating a luxury in a cave with an exiled royal who had quickly accepted him as family.

Wynne remembered Ruck's name. "Your mother Filda is looking for you, Ruck. She kneels before the Stone every day for your safe return."

Ruck blanched, and Duren quickly placed a consoling arm around him. "N-n-n-no. No Filda. No warm blanket and stew and pillow and soft words! She did not know what I did. I was very, very angry and then someone was dead. They wanted to send Ruck out of the Deep Roads and to the mines. Then she would know what I have become. Ruck is small, ugly, and twisted. I wish I could go see her, but Ruck – Ruck is a coward."

"Which is why I swore to take him to the surface," Duren said. He had explained Ruck's situation when he had led the party to the cavern. "Before my exile, I had heard that Ferelden's forces had found a possible cure to the taint. One usually reserved for mabari."

Orzammar's information network was sharp. A neutral trading relationship with everyone, including the Dalish, had likely afforded Duren the means to learn of *any* information regarding darkspawn as Orzammar's former military commander. The Mabari Madness tonic would do nothing for Ruck, but the dwarven scavenger had already consumed two ingredients of the Joining: fresh darkspawn blood, and rare botany like deep mushrooms to make the blood consumable. He just needed the other half of the recipe: a drop of archdemon blood and lyrium to make *that* blood consumable.

“Soldier’s Peak would be your best bet,” Carver suggested. “Warden Solona is adept at a range of healing arts, from spiritual to blood magic. She has studied the taint and...darkspawn...extensively.”

Alistair and Elissa blanched in recollection of Solona’s recent history. “R-Right. We can’t think of anyone else better.”

Ruck’s eyes swam with the courage to hope. Faren smiled at him encouragingly.

Oghren suddenly shot up and marched to a corner of the cavern. “Branka’s journal! She must have camped in this place at one point!”

Duren watched Oghren dig out a leather journal from Ruck’s collection of litter and sit down by the fire. Paper was a resource mostly used by nobility or, in this case, Paragons. “‘Branka?’ You must be close with our living ancestor.”

Oghren uncorked his wineskin as he settled to read. “Yeah. We’re divorced.”

“Oghren, formerly of House Branka, and further back of House Kondrat,” Duren realised. “I remember. My Second often kicked you out of the royal palace. Your devotion to searching for your house and former wife is admirable.”

Oghren snorted. “That’s a diplomatic way of phrasing it.”

“I can’t say if you’re on the right track,” Duren confessed, helping Ruck finish his food. “I’ve only been down here for several weeks, and Ruck had avoided company for five years before meeting me. Paragon Branka must be ahead of me in this trail by months, maybe a year.”

The party collectively groaned. The fire, food, and safety of Ruck’s camp had lifted everyone’s spirits, but they had seen enough of the Deep Roads. They had only been travelling the ruins for three months.

“I *can* confirm,” Duren continued, “that the Legion of the Dead has recently passed through here. Thanks to the trail of darkspawn corpses they leave behind, I have been able to sneak around, especially with these active golems standing around. According to the runes in this passage, there is a thaig up ahead that leads to Bownammar.”

“Dwarven for ‘City of the Dead,’” Oghren translated. “A fortress that Paragon Caridin had built for the Legion of the Dead. One of the finest dwarven works in our history, better than even Orzammar despite its

smaller size. Like everything else, it's lost to darkspawn."

"Now it's called the Dead Trenches," Faren recognised. "We *are* far in the Deep Roads."

"Not far enough," Shale determined. "I know this place. My memories grow sharper the farther we descend. I remember marching...until I couldn't recognise those standing next to me...those who hadn't been given a choice...."

"The Legion of Steel," Elissa guessed. "Shale, you've walked these halls before!"

Duren blinked at the party. They were an unlikely assortment of people bearing mixed crests and not a few Aeducan weapons, one of which was Duren's own. "We haven't finished introductions. What was your purpose for coming down here, again?"

## Nerd

“Ortan Thaig...” Oghren read in awe. “By the Paragons...it’s all true!”

The warden’s party, including Duren and Ruck, stood at a rune-carved entrance of a sprawling stone metropolis dimly lit by luminescent moss and fading light enchantments. Carver didn’t think he’d be rendered speechless by another sight besides Orzammar, but the Ancient age of dwarves was quickly proving him mistaken. Orzammar had originally been the Empire’s capital and was still the largest thaig Carver had seen. However, that was like saying Starkhaven was still larger than Kirkwall.

The Ortan Thaig was *huge*.

Once home to a genius smith with access to lyrium, it was also incredibly developed. Carver could dedicate another encyclopaedia to the abandoned wonders of an underground space as large as a city-state, but Carver knew he lacked the background to properly capture everything. He could already see natural, efficient indoor plumbing from where he stood. There were lyrium carvings that Carver could recognise imitated across Orzammar thanks to the dwarves’ accurately preserved history. Maker, *one* of the buildings in the Ortan Thaig would have been a vacation resort above ground. Disease had been a thing of the past for dwarves since the *Ancient age*.

Carver was beginning to understand just a little of what it meant to be a Paragon. One such person could vault their people into the next century. Or in Caridin’s case, the next *millennium*.

As the party crossed the Ortan Thaig, Faren discovered a chest of writing slates in an abandoned building. The slates’ script was perfectly preserved and mostly in Ancient Common, proving that not only was Orta in Orzammar indeed of a noble caste, but that Caridin’s own mother had been of House Ortan.

Faren stowed the slates away in his pack. “That girl’s gonna reward us big time,” he cackled, but he wouldn’t let anyone else carry the slates. No one understood better than him how important elevating one’s caste was.

At the other side of the Ortan Thaig, the party could see campfire scorch marks, more abandoned journals, and darkspawn corpses. The Legion of the Dead, Branka, and her house had certainly passed



through here. Duren and Ruck thus determined that they would help the warden's party return Branka to Orzammar on account that the wardens would then help them reach Soldier's Peak. After the nightmarish encounter with spiders, everyone agreed that it was a fair trade.

Faren determinedly tested Duren on how he felt seeing his family's relics in a thief's hands, but the pacifist had been pleased to see them wielded for exterminating darkspawn instead of gathering dust. Duren had even dismissed Oghren's offer to switch axes, claiming that he had already grown accustomed to his humble weapon. In the Deep Roads where their only enemies were darkspawn or spiders, Duren was an unlikely ally to have.

Past the Ortan Thaig, the remnants of a paved road crumbled into a ravine that made the gap in Caridin's Cross look like a bunny hop. With torchlight alone, no one could see the other side. Fearful of attracting spiders, no one tested other means of light and simply hugged the wall as they hiked a trail cutting into the side of a cliff. It spanned the width of the average person, but with both hands committed to grasping crevices in a cliff, imagining one gust of wind had become everyone's greatest fear. Shale made sure to take up the rear at a distance, where she could dig her hands and feet into the cliff like shovels and climb sideways.

At one point in the treacherous trail, Carver squinted.

"Can anyone see better?" he asked. "I mean even without Ruck's luminescent mushrooms."

Uneven breaths echoed off the cliffside.

"Why are you always right?" Elissa whispered. "Maker — Alistair, Faren, look down."

*Everyone* shifted, and dozens of kilometres below them, at the bottom of the pitch black darkness, was a flowing river of bright sand — no, torchlight. Skittering like spider eyes. Marching to discordant thrums of nature, screeching. Within a ravine's cathedral acoustics, it could have been singing.

Someone gasped sharply. "Are those—?"

The thought was swallowed by a leathery flap of air, before suddenly a stroke of ink bled over the distant torches.

*Screeeeech.*

Carver distantly realised that Ruck had been softly burbling the entire time, camouflaged by the movement below the party that they were only now seeing. Of course. Ruck was half-mad with the taint. The distraction explained how the dwarf could calmly follow them through a narrow trail.

*Screeeeeeeeaaaaahhhhaaaahhhhhhaaaaa.*

The stroke of ink flicked its tail like a contemplative comma. It flapped its wings.

——*Screech.*

It looked up.

Elissa suddenly sobbed. Carver threw an arm out in the darkness and pinned everyone in front of him to the wall — in comfort, for safety, both. No one had time to think before all of the air in the ravine abruptly sucked upwards, rushing like a dry vacuum preluding a thunderstorm. The clash in Ostagar suddenly split through Carver's head. He heard roaring. Screams. His brain felt like it was on fire. Reality and memory bled together then crumbled together, before finally Carver separated the grains and reassembled himself.

When he looked back down, the archdemon had vanished.

Gone, to slither with another stretch of its horde further down the ravine.

The edge of Carver's fingertips shuddered with stifled sobs.

"Warden Elissa," Carver murmured. "Breathe. Elissa."

She stilled, then exhaled. "...My first name. No address." She breathed against the cliff. "This is the first time from you."

Between them, Alistair suddenly giggled.

Carver sighed. "That's what it takes for you?"

Elissa straightened, and composure rippled down the line, returning everyone to proper hiking postures. They resumed inching forward. With rabbiting hearts, time circled down into a drain until no one noticed they had reached wide, solid ground before fading enchantments crawled into everyone's sight. Carver lifted his head to

see a combination of Caridin's Cross, the corridor highway, and the Ortan Thaig all woven together into the perfect stone maze fortress draped with lava moats and lavafalls.

Bownammar.

Carver hit his stiff knees with his fists. He was the "reliable one" who could calmly use his head. He had to. Then his second childhood memories resurfaced like an aftershock. Carver was Quiet for his Age, Weird, Dedicated to Learning of the Maker, Not Good Enough to be a Templar. Self-doubt crept in. Elissa and Alistair stepped into his field of vision, followed by Wynne, Sten, Zevran, and Morrigan.

Carver of the past was useless and couldn't fit in.

Carver of the present had company from whom he could learn how to fight or curb magic. People who...*liked* his addition to their party.

Faren, Oghren, Duren, and Ruck filtered past him. Shale lumbered up from behind. "Is it hurrying up?"

Carver breathed, strength back in his knees. "Bownammar is stirring something in me."

Ahead, Faren snorted. "Nerd!"

Shale rumbled. "Me as well."

Bownammar stood somberly where the Ortan Thaig was beautiful and Orzammar was grand. Gazing too deeply into one direction of the fortress threatened to pull on a thread of Carver's sanity. Carver should have been in awe the moment they had arrived, but his own mind had instead chosen to trip him up. He belatedly tried processing Bownammar's structure before he concluded that he was better off saving his mental stamina for something more useful, like coordinating against spiders and darkspawn.

He wanted to forget about the party's recent encounter with the archdemon.

A bloody screech suddenly echoed out from Bownammar, and everyone flinched for their weapons. However, the cry vastly differed from an archdemon and its entire blighted army.

Elissa rose her shield and hurried *towards* the sound, the party quickly assembling behind her in case of an ambush. Between everyone's

ready weapons, they resembled a porcupine skittering over rubble and through twisting hallways. Bownammar's enclosed passages opened up into terraced ramparts, and a few levels below the party, a stone bridge feeding into a barbican jutted out. A crowd of armoured dwarves was fighting a mob of darkspawn in the square space such that it resembled a moving painting. The party's mages fired token potshots at the darkspawn, but they needed to navigate down Bownammar's confusing architecture for the bridge in order to be in a useful range.

By the time the party found its way to the bridge, the dwarves were expecting them.

"You be Grey Wardens?" a dwarf called out. "We're assuming there's not much other magical company down here! We're trying to cut through the darkspawn's territory!"

"You're mad!" Faren barked.

Pushing the line back all by themselves? Who could these warriors be but the Legion of the Dead? The party bolstered the legion and tipped the clash over in the legion's favour, until finally the darkspawn scrambled out of the barbican and down another length of bridge. On the other side across a river of lava, another section of the stone fortress stood tall, swarming with darkspawn like an ant colony.

Carver belatedly realised that the Legion had cleared out the current section of Bownammar all by themselves.

The Legion welcomed the warden's party to sit with them and catch their breath. The legion commander, Kardol, removed his helmet to reveal the full-face tattoos of a legionnaire. Based on Shale's interaction with golems, it was safe to assume that Caridin's golems didn't bother dwarves with full-face markings, as the Legion of the Dead had been allies since the Ancient age. The warden's party followed suit and removed their helmets to let their faces breathe.

Legionnaire squads meanwhile split off to claim their territory along the river of lava and dissuade darkspawn from invading at a different entry point. Duren explained that the current crowd was only one legionnaire platoon of three scattered throughout the Deep Roads, fighting darkspawn until death claimed them. They were the most effective military force under the command of Orzammar's crown.

Kardol shook his head at the party's mission. "Paragon or not, journeying farther down the Deep Roads than here is suicidal.

Frankly, continuing the search for your Paragon is a foolish endeavour.”

Oghren stood up. “You take that back.”

“Oghren.” Elissa tugged the berserker down and turned to Carver. “At one point, dismissing advice becomes carelessness. Do you agree that it’s foolish to keep going?”

Kardol rose a brow at what credentials Carver could possibly have to speak of the Deep Roads, but the commander made no comment.

Carver rubbed his temples, then glanced at the other side of the river. The majority of darkspawn in sight were genlocks, darkspawn produced by a dwarven broodmother.

Carver reluctantly admitted, “House Branka is nearby.”

“Ha!” Oghren bellowed. “What did I say? Branka is too smart to kill! She’s not going to let her house go down easily!”

“As you wish,” Kardol allowed, “but the Legion will not follow. We have a sub-fortress to secure, then we will notify the other platoons of our gain. The Dead Trenches will be the City of the Dead for at least today.”

Kardol rose and left the warden’s party to their privacy.

“We should take this opportunity to rest without setting up shifts,” Carver suggested.

Nods answered his idea. Everyone was mentally and emotionally drained from their journey. Their defensive dam against three months of paranoia and intense combat had finally cracked. The party visibly wilted and spread out to loosen their bedrolls.

Oghren shrugged and plopped down to uncork his wineskin. “No no no — empty!?”

Faren’s face wrinkled with disgust as he flattened his bedroll. “Do you think of nothing except drinking?”

Alistair muttered. “And your ex-wife.”

Oghren tossed his wineskin aside and leaned back on a slab of rock. “Pretty much.”

“I can’t believe I once wanted to enter a caste,” Faren commented. “To imagine there are people like you in the *warrior* caste. Would it kill you to treat this as more than just a pastime? Or an obligation?”

Oghren chortled. “I’m a selfish guy.”

“Cool it,” Carver cut in. “We’re all tired. Let’s regroup and resume where we started off tomorrow.”

The dam was close to bursting, but Faren grudgingly relented and lied down on his bedroll. Carver fell asleep the moment his head hit a pillow. In his last thoughts, he knew the wardens of the party still wouldn’t sleep straight that night. The archdemon’s presence seemed to crawl under the earth as it did the wardens’ skin. Faren’s outburst hadn’t been the first from a warden in the group.

The closer the party drew to the Anvil, the deeper they trod into the archdemon’s home.

X

If the corridor of spiders was a nightmare, the other half of Bownammar was hell itself. Carver spent most of his time after the encounter erasing his memory of the experience. The warden’s party couldn’t clear out the other side of the lava river, and merely carved out a path for themselves towards an exit.

Any exit.

Carver didn’t know what possessed him to stick with the party in this chunk of their mission. Willingly braving the darkspawn-infested half of Bownammar was like locking himself in a coffin with millions of bugs crawling all over his body, trying to scratch and burrow into his skin. The darkspawn pressed on the warden’s party from every angle, and everyone did their best to paint the floor with darkspawn blood. At one point, it rained crimson on Carver’s face through his helmet. He sealed his lips shut and breathed heavily through his nose.

Two ogres charged for the party, flattening other darkspawn into the ceiling, floor, and walls. Elissa and Alistair leaned into each other and rammed into the ogres, determinedly forcing the ogres to an eventual stop. Alistair lost his balance and fell sideways. Elissa whipped her gaze to him, confirming the exhausted and sleep-deprived warden had fainted, before she lifted her shield and psyched herself up for another clash.

Carver split a genlock in half and called out to Elissa. “Warden, do you trust me!?”

“Spit it out!” Elissa exasperatedly hollered.

Carver choked back his surprise at her curt faith. “Raise your shield and vault a dwarf up!”

Faren twirled his two maces and crouched. “Like facing a dragon all over again!”

“One!” Elissa shouted. “Two! Three—”

Faren sprinted and, with Elissa’s strength, was propelled up and at the closest ogre. While Faren pummelled its eyes in with his maces, the other ogre rose out of its daze and pinpointed Elissa, who wasn’t ready to shield bash it.

Suddenly, a golden sword lodged itself into the ogre’s forehead.

Sten glanced at Carver. “You remember our training.”

“Pilum,” Carver panted, hastily equipping his bow and quiver.

Two flying axes shattered the ogre’s horns as it tipped over and fell at Elissa’s feet. If it had still had horns, Alistair would have been paste.

Elissa looked back to see Oghren and Duren dashing over to pick up their thrown weapons. A new layer of dust and rubble collapsed throughout their section of Bownammar as Faren’s ogre keeled over, dead. At the loss of their main power, the darkspawn around the party swiftly retreated all through one doorway padded with flesh. The hallway past it pulsed pink and purple.

Carver fired arrows after them, then tucked his weapons away to yank Summer Sword out of the ogre. He shook the blood out of his eyes. “Everyone warmed up?”

Wynne leaned against Shale, catching her breath. “You consider that *light*?”

“That’s the first exit we’ve seen.” Carver tipped his head at the fleshy hallway. “All of the darkspawn we’ve encountered probably came from there. Since we need our mages in top condition, I’ll have to leave the rear and take to the front with Alistair.”

Just standing near Carver made casting difficult. However without

him at the rear, the party's power distribution would be unbalanced, and the mages would have less support covering their backs.

Morrigan panted. "I can handle myself."

Wynne nodded. "I didn't join in this mission with the intent to sleep through the blight with coverlets tucked under my chin."

Zevran waved a sharp substance under Alistair's nose that the assassin promised wasn't poison. Elissa helped Alistair sit up and consume the last of his rations.

"Don't worry about it," Elissa insisted at Alistair's hesitation. "We can share mine until we return to Orzammar."

Alistair reluctantly regained his energy. "You already feed Dog scraps."

Wynne passed out the last of her healing potions. "We might as well prepare ourselves. Carver, what are you expecting down that hallway?"

Alistair turned at the question and paled at the fleshy sight. "Maker...."

Carver's lips thinned. Wynne had it right; they had to be as prepared as possible, including in strategy. "First, everyone here needs to know what a broodmother is...."

At Carver's explanation and Alistair's input, everyone looked queasy. Even Dog whined. Duren and Oghren shook their heads in disgust, having known of broodmothers, but only as rumours captured in the Shaperate. When the party readied themselves and carefully trod into the hallway, the horde of darkspawn returned in greater force. Wynne and Morrigan briskly alternated the responsibility of casting shields until they drained all of their lyrium potions. Then it was a battle of attrition.

The hallway opened up to the inside of a stomach, complete with quivering flesh running everywhere and mounds of discarded clothes, armour, and bones. In a fleshy cranny up above, a grey and bruised dwarven woman hollowly watched the party slash their way in. Below her, a towering mass of tentacles, bellies, and breasts shuddered at the party's presence and spewed venom at them. Wynne hastily cast a shield just in time to divert the spray to the ground, where a layer of flesh sizzled.



Zevran gaped up at the slimiest, ugliest living organ he had the misfortune of seeing. It even had a face. He remarked as such while he tossed flasks of venom at it with nasty effectiveness.

“*That’s a broodmother!?*” Elissa yelped.

The bruised dwarf sitting above them chanted a rhyme that far from alleviated the horror of their surroundings. Oghren gaped up at her. “I think that’s my cousin, Hespith!”

Shale grabbed a tentacle and tore it in half. “It’s chanting of the fall of its house.”

Faren flinched in disgust. “Oghren, I think the broodmother and darkspawn are—”

“I dare you to finish that!” Oghren roared.

Carver would later work very, very hard to erase his memory of the experience. He even refused to acknowledge it in the moment. It was worse than briefly brushing the archdemon. In a word, the party’s encounter with a darkspawn breeding ground was *bloody*.

By the time they crawled out the other end of the exit, they were as filthy and ragged as newborn darkspawn themselves. At least they had completely exterminated darkspawn from Bownammar. Carver could then wearily remove his armour and wipe himself down of slime, blood, and spit where he had refused to accidentally ingest either of both. The party collapsed in a cavern of stalactites and stalagmites, dipping their cleaning cloths into rivulets of water to quickly make themselves feel like people again.

The party hollowly agreed to not speak of what they had experienced.

In a corner of the cavern, Elissa quietly wept for Solona and other victims of darkspawn. Ruck distractedly petted Dog, closing himself off from his environment in self-defence.

Hespith had died.

No one spoke of it. Of how happy she had been to leave.

Carver punched a rock.

Shale scoffed. “Don’t waste its efforts. It is no golem.”

Carver sighed into his hands. “Don’t change, Shale.”

No one remembered falling asleep, but when they awoke, they realised Shale had stood guard for them through their rest. The golem simply gestured to the rest of the cavern before taking her turn to sleep. A sealed stone doorway could be seen on the other side of the cavern, and before it, a stack of stone gears, shapes, and intricate carvings that composed a puzzle.

“I don’t...” Duren whispered in awe, “I don’t recognise this from history. I’ve seen complicated locks built into safes, but...this system transcends all of them. This room is *dedicated* to locking a single door.”

Morrigan tiredly glanced at skeletons, darkspawn corpses, and dwarven corpses littering the cavern. “And keeping unwanted visitors out.”

“This must be a work of Paragon Caridin’s,” Alistair concluded. “We’re drawing closer to the Anvil.”

Faren noticed an armour pattern shared across all the dwarven corpses. He said nothing to Oghren. When the berserker lumbered over to look, Faren quickly redirected him to the cavernous puzzle. “On the other side of that door, we might find Paragon Branka.”

Oghren reluctantly nodded. “How do you think she’ll greet my rescue? With make-up sex?” He chortled.

For once since the start of their journey, Faren didn’t respond sharply. “Hopefully not on the spot. I don’t want to see that.”

Zevran poked at the stone puzzle, and a shape swivelled into place, lighting up the cavern with triggered lyrium. The assassin hummed and turned a gear, followed by another shifting shape. Zevran’s proficiency with traps was shining through.

“My dear wardens,” Zevran crooned, “if I solve this, will *I* receive sex?”

“Zevran,” Alistair sighed, having long passed the point of fatigue, “if you get us out of here, I might kiss you.”

# Surfacer

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A sharp cry split through the air, and the warden's party whiplashed to the source with hands on their weapons. An armoured dwarf lumbered over from a hidden alcove of the cavern with a lifted chin and hands working through a packed ration.

"You lot destroyed my free labour!" The stranger bit into her rations. "Well, I only needed them to solve Paragon Caridin's puzzles, anyway."

Oghren stepped forward, bewildered. "Branka?"

The venerated smith laughed with her mouth full. "I didn't think I'd see the day where you might be useful, Oghren! I've learned a lot from this place, but not enough to open the doors to the Anvil itself." She calmly placed a hand on a nearby gear. "If you don't want to be stuck here for the rest of your life, then I suggest you and those surfacers solve it."

"What's *wrong* with you!?" Oghren burst. "I remember a woman whose genius shone through in just one minute of conversation! Not this monster who would turn her house into — darkspawn!"

"Anyone would be *honoured* to help a Paragon," Branka scoffed. "I did a favour for your house and mine by using them for a good cause. Once I get past Paragon Caridin's dangerous puzzles and find the Anvil, I can learn to create *golems* for Orzammar. This will change everything!"

Elissa warily eyed Branka's hand on a gear. It was likely connected to hidden traps in the cavern. "Paragon Branka, you don't know the price of creating a golem."

Zevran cautiously stepped back from the puzzle he had been tinkering with. "I don't think she cares."

Branka leaned on the gear. "You've always been nug-brained, Oghren. Be grateful for the privilege of helping me ascend." She turned the gear, and the cavern's puzzle whirred to life.

Fire and lyrium shot out of the walls, and Zevran adeptly twisted around them in a dance across tiles. The party swiftly caught on to which ones were safe in what pattern. Meanwhile, Branka carefully strolled for the sealed door. The smith was going to bolt through it if the party could solve the puzzle before dying.

Alistair grumbled at Oghren. “I despise your ex.”

Faren quickly contributed. “I can’t believe a dwarf like her can be a *Paragon!*”

“She’s smart,” Oghren huffed as he dodged traps. “Or she *was*. And our hate-sex had been really good.”

Morrigan scowled. “You reach for straws when listing her good points.”

Duren wrenched Ruck aside of a swinging stone shape and struck at it with his axe, to no effect. The puzzle couldn’t be destroyed.

“Zevran!” Elissa cried out, “Carver!”

“On it!”

The two of them leapt back and scanned the cavern’s mechanisms. Zevran ducked under a round of lyrium fired from a revolving stone head. The lyrium hit an anvil sculpture, lighting it up. Ghostly apparitions of dwarves suddenly descended from the air and attacked the warden’s party and each other. The party had encountered these in the Deep Roads before: spirits of fallen dwarves who had traversed the area the party now disturbed. From the various armour patterns, the dwarves originated from the present all the way back to the Empire’s efforts to find Caridin and his lost Anvil.

Shale scooped up Sten and dumped him away from another round of lyrium. She batted away the dwarf spirits. “Annoying.”

Sten froze for a moment at his first time being manhandled. It was usually the other way around in the party.

Carver squinted at the second anvil sculpture that lyrium had hit, now glowing while the first one faded. “Duren, hit the sculpture behind you!”

At Duren’s strike, the spirits swiftly vanished, and the stone face swivelled to shoot another anvil sculpture with lyrium. Spirits

descended on the party again.

“Four sculptures,” Zevran caught on, “two already struck in time. Elissa, behind you!”

The shield maiden wacked an anvil sculpture with her sword, to no effect. She shoved a spirit aside and hit again, this time in a vertical swing like a hammer. The stone face swivelled.

Teamwork. The puzzle was an homage to the smith caste of the past, when they hadn’t competed against each other and simply struck their anvils in harmony. The warden’s party fell into step and completed the puzzle, slowing the mechanisms to a stop and unlocking the door. Carver watched Branka rush through. The smith Paragon had missed the puzzle’s character entirely, and had forced her relatives and even her lover Hespith through months of suffering. The first casualty of Branka’s actions had been Branka herself.

Oghren hurried after the Paragon. “Wait, Branka! There might be more dangerous puzzles!”

The warden’s party dashed through the doorway and into the crudest cavern room they had seen yet. Its naturally high ceiling and rough terrain imitated a hundred other water- and lava-carved caverns everywhere. In fact, only its shaved stalagmites suggested that anyone had been there. Half of the cavern’s ground was carved away by a river of lava as wide as the cavern was tall, and it sluggishly flowed kilometres below everyone. The cavern’s traversable half was essentially a cliff.

And there, at the edge, sat an enormous lyrium-infused anvil the size of a dwarf. It cast an unearthly blue glow upon the cavern in contrast to the lava’s harsh light.

Standing between the party and the anvil was a squadron of golems larger than Shale, led by a lyrium-patterned stone giant nearly twice Shale’s size.

“*Maker*,” Alistair breathed.

“You don’t understand!” Branka roared at the giant. “Orzammar needs golems! Honestly — if you won’t help me make more, then you will at least move the Anvil for me! Dulen harn!”

Branka raised a control rod fashioned out of armour and lyrium, and the golems in front of her abruptly straightened. The massive one

vibrated with resistance as it ever so slowly lunged for the rod.

“Branka, stop!” Oghren yelled.

Faren threw a dagger, but Branka jerked the rod out of its path and stepped back. “Paragon Branka!” Faren warned. “No invention is worth dwarven lives! Creating a golem requires the ultimate sacrifice!”

“A noble privilege,” Branka dismissed as she waved her rod. The other golems crouched into aggressive stances and charged at the party. “Those who become golems will have their house elevated. It is an honour to serve Orzammar.”

Shale punched the nearest golem, but there were too many of them. The party scattered like ants under the stomping heels of stone giants. Faren shoved Morrigan aside of a golem’s fist and fell back as it clipped his face.

“Blast,” Faren cursed as blood dripped into his eyes. He squinted, recognising the golem’s other fist swinging in for him.

Morrigan hastily cast a shield over him. “Dwarf!”

Branka turned in time to witness an Aeducan mace fly at her arm holding the control rod before the Paragon cried out in agony. Her arm tumbled to the ground behind her separately, the control rod fracturing along the way.

The golems immediately slumped, and the largest golem stumbled forward in mid-lunge. It righted itself before it could topple the golems over like dominoes and crush the mortals in the room. Morrigan rushed over to a bloody Faren who had chosen to throw his weapon at Branka instead of save himself. Fortunately, the golem he had been facing had stalled its swing just in time to only break Faren’s nose, and not flatten his face. Morrigan pulled Faren out from under the golem as it straightened and morosely apologised in Ancient Common.

“Blood and ashes,” Wynne swore as she tended to Faren’s wounds. She cursed again when she drained the last of her mana. “Faren, squeeze Morrigan’s hand if you can hear us.”

Carver removed his helmet and wiped the dust from his eyes. Faren squeezed Morrigan’s hand through Wynne’s diagnosis of a possible concussion. Fortunately, the rogue was merely rattled, not concussed.

Oghren knelt and embraced Branka to stem her bleeding, but she wrestled in his grip. “Branka,” Oghren struggled, “you were a genius. The best of us dwarves in Orzammar. What happened to you? Was it me?”

Branka vainly twisted away from his help. “I *am* the best! I’m trying to save Orzammar!”

The lyrium steel giant lumbered over to the pair. “I heard much of the same from Emperor Valtor. I believed him, until he began sacrificing the unwilling. For mine protests, he ordered his smiths to cauter a golem out of me. They hadst not the full understanding of control rods, allowing mine escape with what dram allies I hath’t left.”

Shale gazed at the golems around her and turned to the largest one. “You’re Paragon Caridin.”

The giant rumbled a soft tone. “Shayle. It warms mine heart to see an old friend for the last time.”

Elissa reeled back. “You’re dying?”

“Mine allies and I gaged our lives to keepeth the anvil out of dwarven reach,” Caridin responded. “At last, our mission is ended, for better or worse. I am weary and seek eternal rest.”

“—Wait,” Shale stopped him. “I don’t remember my past life as a dwarf, yet you know me.”

“Ov’r time, memories becometh sand lost between our fingers.” Caridin placed a hand on Shale’s shoulder and guided her to a cavern wall. Unlike typical dwarven etchings or magnetic script, the wall was carved in monstrous hand. “Ere we couldst eke lose ourselves, we recorded our names in stone, to never forget.”

Oghren held Branka tightly as her cursing and wild motions tapered off into a bloody stillness. Oghren slowly released her and laid her down on the ground. A crimson puddle had consumed where they were, catching the lava’s light and casting Oghren in a curtain of orange and red. He could have been glowing. Solemnly quiet, he resembled a weary spirit of war.

“Shayle of House Cadash,” Shale read off of the wall. “—Ah, I know her. She’s me! I’m alive!”

Caridin swivelled his head and observed the warden’s party, their

attention split between treating themselves, giving Shale privacy, and in Oghren's case, laying a Paragon to rest. Caridin hummed. "Thee hath found a purpose to live for. I am happy for thee."

Another golem lumbered over. "The rest of us hath't nay spark to keep us alive. Let this beest our final parting."

Faren rose with the mages' assistance. "Hold on, what about us? We were supposed to bring Paragon Branka back."

Oghren sighed and stood up, his knees and entire front wet with Branka's blood. "She died long ago, kid."

Faren turned to Caridin and Shale. "We need to at least bring back proof that we had made it this far. Would...taking rubbings off the wall suffice?"

"Preserving a history of sacrifice," Shale understood, running a stone finger over her name. "For once, it has a good idea."

Morrigan crossed her arms. "A chip off the Anvil would serve as more solid proof. 'Tis of greater value than Paragon Branka, I would say."

Zevran and Sten nodded in agreement.

Alistair hissed at them. "*Timing.*"

Oghren shook blood and dirt off his hands. "...A scrap of lyrium-infused rock proves nothing."

Duren regretfully agreed. "The Assembly won't believe anything short of a work by Caridin. I doubt all of our efforts together would move the Anvil any significant distance, either."

Faren scowled at the mood and stomped over to rejoin the party. "Sod it, Orzammar needs to crown a king! You, stone giant – you're a Paragon. Smith a crown fitting for a hard-headed brother-in-law. When we bring it to the Assembly, they can give the Wardens a *huge sodding army* and even give *them* back their houses." Faren pointed at Oghren and Duren. "Why, the Assembly can make this drunkard a *Paragon* while they're at it!"

"What," Oghren reacted.

"*What?*" Elissa gaped.

"Right?" Faren turned to Carver.



Carver threw his hands up in the air. It had been a long three months. “They’ll recognise whoever delivers the crown to them. For displaying the intellect to solve Paragon Caridin’s puzzles, the martial skill to fight entire hordes of darkspawn, and the charisma to lead Paragon Branka’s search party, the Assembly might just grant the title of Paragon. However, the process still takes months to finalise.”

“None of the dwarves present really *led* the party,” Duren admitted. “I even joined late.”

“We don’t need it anyway,” Elissa pointed out. “If Paragon Caridin can truly make a crown for us, we’ll be able to return to civilization with something to show.”

The prospect of finally leaving the Deep Roads lit up the atmosphere.

“All of thee understandeth the dangers of sharing the Anvil,” Caridin rumbled with pleasure, casting his gaze upon Shale and the rest of the party. “Mine heart is soothed. The least I may do is fashion thee a crown.”

Caridin and the other golems assembled before the Anvil and passed tools and materials between each other with greater harmony than the puzzle the party had solved earlier. The cavern sang with hypnotic metallic tinkering. The warden’s party grabbed the opportunity to doze off, and when they awoke, only Caridin remained before the Anvil. He crouched down and handed them a crown of burgundy and gold that seemed to capture the earth’s fiery heart itself, nearly luminescent in even the faintest of light.

Its angular shape mirrored Bownammar and the Ortan Thaig, revealing a new appearance with every second glance. In the centre was a shape composed of a thousand increasingly smaller shapes seemingly weaving together as the crown changed hands. Carver’s eyes swam as he intently focused.

“The crest of House Caridin,” Duren recognised as Faren carefully held the crown. “A mark of the deepest gratitude one may offer, as far-reaching as the Stone itself.”

Shale was suddenly struck with emotion. Her voice cracked as she watched Caridin tug the Anvil with him for the cliff’s edge. “Caridin, you don’t have to go.”

Caridin laid a hand on the Anvil and sighed with the full weight of his accomplishments and regrets. “We cannot fall in combat. Allow us at

least to fall on our sword.”

The rest of the golems had gone ahead of Caridin and leapt into the lava.

Caridin turned around, the cavities of his face lighting up like glimmering eyes. “I count myself fortunate to have yet still a happy ending. Atrast nal tunsha.”

The Paragon and Anvil vanished over the edge of the cliff.

X

The Assembly chamber resembled a hollow egg crowded with as many concentric benches and tables as possible. Acoustics allowed the most distant attendee to be heard clearly from the centre floor. When fully occupied, it was an intimidating space.

It was also rudely interrupted.

“Everyone cease your yapping!” Faren stormed in...with crutches. The warden’s party trailed after him, exhausted in every meaning of the word. For Faren, he had finally snapped. “I’ve seen *dusters* settle debates faster.”

A deshyr spluttered from where they sat. “And who are *you*?”

“The *Grey Wardens*,” Faren threw the title back, “have come to name Prince Bhelen Aeducan king!”

The entire chamber immediately erupted into yelling. Writing slates went flying.

“*Partha*, please,” Bhelen pleaded with a close-lipped smile like the cat who ate the canary. “Now. Let us hear what Warden Faren has to say. Is Paragon Branka returned to us?”

Faren snorted. “She’s dead.”

The crowded furor returned.

Faren shot Oghren a look, who shrugged and raised the crown into the air.

The chamber swiftly silenced. “Is that...?”

Faren jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “Paragon Caridin’s

recognition of Prince Bhelen's right to rule. Paragon Caridin is also dead. He was more recent, though."

Harrowmont slowly descended from his bench to analyse the crown, and Bhelen followed suit. The deshyr that had been conducting the Assembly session before Faren's interruption asked to inspect the crown, to which Oghren passed it over. The deshyr nodded contemplatively and held the crown up to announce that it was indeed a work crafted by Caridin's own hands. Harrowmont reluctantly conceded to the unmistakable detail and crest, while Bhelen straightened up with visible satisfaction. A hush fell over the chamber with quickened excitement.

"Lord Harrowmont," Bhelen turned to his adversary. "You crowned the last king. It is only appropriate you continue the custom."

In other words, tradition dictated that royal rule was inherited. *Get in line.*

Harrowmont's face twisted, and he reluctantly accepted the crown in his hands to lower it on Bhelen's head. The grey-haired noble recited the ceremonial declarations, and all of the Assembly lords bowed their heads in acknowledgement, some with disgruntled whispers. Harrowmont and the session speaker stepped back and announced Orzammar's new king. Bhelen's supporters across the chamber most vocally celebrated.

The session speaker turned to the warden's party with a relieved sigh. As a neutral party, the deshyr was glad that the succession debate was over. "As Steward of the Assembly, may I ask the Wardens how Paragon Branka's disappearance was resolved and the matter of Orzammar's king was settled with Paragon Caridin?"

Faren glanced at Carver. "Oh, it involved solving Paragon Caridin's puzzles, fighting entire hordes of darkspawn, and leading a search party. Treacherous stuff."

A distant deshyr scoffed. "What would a *brand* know?"

Duren shoved his way into sight. "More than a wordsmith who can't leash his own tongue, Lord Sardirak."

The chamber gasped, and even Bhelen staggered back as if struck. "Duren...!?"

"By the Ancestors," Duren spoke nobly, "I have survived my exile to

the Deep Roads and journeyed with the Grey Wardens to its depths, where Paragon Caridin and his Anvil resided. I have witnessed the evils of man, that our countrymen must renounce themselves into the Legion and face darkspawn for the rest of their lives. I have witnessed the evils of dwarva, that we had crafted weapons out of each other in days past, and with Paragon Branka's word would readily do so now."

The Assembly sat raptured by Duren's words.

The former prince held out his hands. "I have no claim to the throne, nor a desire for it. I would not otherwise have witnessed my brother Bhelen's ascension and celebrated as joyously as the rest of you. Allow me thus to say this: Faren of the Grey Wardens shares only the truth. May the Stone hold record."

Murmurs echoed back at the statement. The Steward dazedly turned to the Assembly, still reeling. "By these truthful accounts, our customs cannot withhold respect for such conduct. I recognise two houseless, Duren and Oghren, and request the restoration of their houses."

The Assembly uttered their ready agreement after hearing of such feats. Giving Duren and Oghren their last names back was minimal effort.

The Steward then turned to the party. "Warden Faren, Lord Duren, your descriptions speak of intellect, martial skill, and charisma worthy of a Paragon. Who among you led this mission?"

Duren passively shrugged and looked at Faren.

Faren gestured to Oghren. "He can tell you all about it."

Oghren shuffled forwards and gratefully slapped Faren on the back. "Yeah, I'll tell you the truth."

The Assembly attentively fell silent.

Oghren jerked his chin. "We all followed Faren's lead."

Faren whipped his gaze at Oghren, who innocently watched the Assembly erupt into another debate. Faren hissed. "What are you doing? You can restore your honour! People won't be able to look down on you for being a drunk anymore!"

Oghren chortled. "I never wanted a title, kid. I just wanted a family." His ex-wife had wiped out his relatives and died. Oghren had nothing

left except his original surname, Kondrat. Still, he appreciated it. “You gave me that.”

Duren’s lips thinned. “Oghren....”

“This is preposterous!” a deshyr cried out. “Granting the title of Paragon to a *casteless*? The Assembly mustn’t fall so low!”

Bhelen snapped out of his stupor to clap his hands twice and glare. “Lord Sardirak, enough! Like everyone else here, you acknowledged that these feats reflect Paragon traits through your own silence. To take back your words here only shames *you*.” Bhelen spread his arms out. “Of course, I welcome everyone to politely question my logic. I have for a time suggested that any dwarf who proves themselves in the Deep Roads is worthy of a warrior caste. Allow me to humbly point out that Warden Faren is living proof that much can be accomplished beyond our traditional systems.”

Another deshyr scoffed. “Oh, you *would* take this chance to further your platform, Prince Bhelen!”

Bhelen flicked his fingers. “I believe I just heard sedition. Guards, take this deshyr away for later investigation to keep our *king* honest.”

The chamber’s energy mellowed while the deshyr was escorted out of the chamber kicking and screaming.

Duren bowed his head to his brother. “Those of us who don’t have Assembly seats will politely excuse ourselves. Long live the king.”

“Long live the king,” the chamber murmured back as the warden’s party retreated.

Outside the chamber, Faren exhaled deeply. “Well, that was almost as hectic as the Deep Roads. Never thought I’d compare politics to that.”

Duren’s shoulders slumped, exhausted. That had been the first he had seen his living family since being exiled. The chamber had been a whirlwind. Duren hadn’t even had time to feel awkward or gauge if he was still upset at his brother deep down inside.

Elissa jabbed a thumb at the chamber doors. “How long do you think *that* will take?”

Carver sighed. “As I said, months.”

Faren blinked. “They’re really considering making *me* a Paragon?”

“Dead serious,” Duren confirmed. “Bhelen intends to make his visions for Orzammar a reality. No matter the means.”

“You risked your life supporting Faren,” Elissa realised. “Now that he knows you’re alive, King Bhelen might go after you to keep his story about your betrayal unquestioned.”

“Which is why I will talk to him after the Assembly session,” Duren revealed. “I have no wish for violence, and I am a lord only in name. Royal inheritance is beyond me. If Bhelen wishes for me to support his story, I will speak such words, but I draw the line at sacrificing more than my tongue. I will remind my brother that I am no threat to him.”

Morrigan quirked her brow. “That might not work.”

Duren nodded in acquiescence. “All the same, I will not know peace outside of the Deep Roads until I try. Warden Elissa, Alistair, and Faren; if I do not survive, do I have your word that you will see Ruck to Soldier’s Peak?”

The three wardens agreed.

Duren patted Ruck’s back towards the party. “I will wait for my brother in the royal palace.”

The party split off to rest in a tavern or grab food, especially in the case of Alistair, Elissa, and Dog. Shale followed Faren to the Shaperate to share Shale’s rubbings and Faren’s proof that House Ortan existed. Carver broke away to find a corner of a tavern he wasn’t banned from and drink to the bottom of a cup.

Oghren eventually found Carver and joined him. The red-bearded berserker took a swig of a foul-smelling drink. “Ah, that hits the spot.” He glanced at Carver’s half-empty mug. “You still working through your first?”

Carver swirled the liquid in his mug. “What are you here for, Oghren?”

“Eh, this is the only tavern I’m not banned from.”

Carver snorted. “Me too.”

“Oh?” Oghren cackled and lifted his flagon. “I’ll drink to that!”

Carver's lips twitched upwards and he tapped his drink against Oghren's in a toast. They both knocked back a gulp, though Oghren kept going a bit after Carver set his drink down. The berserker finally lowered his flagon and burped.

Oghren looked over at Carver staring down at his cup. "You can't think your way through that, you know."

Dwarven ale was smooth, black, and flecked with oily iridescence, as if a brewer had squeezed the heart out of an opal. It was almost pretty.

Carver spoke into his drink. "Maybe I'm trying to reflect on the past three months."

Oghren snorted. "Or forget."

"If it's not rude to ask...."

"Oh, bother," Oghren waved a hand, "better to ask for forgiveness than permission."

Carver conceded. "Is that why you drink whenever you can? To forget?"

Oghren had gone through a lifetime of misfortune by the time the warden's party had met him. He had lost much:

Freedom of choice and his first love, Felsi, when Oghren's family had married him off to Branka. His entire family's support when Branka had become a Paragon, absorbed his house, and begun an affair with his cousin Hespith. His entire family's lives when Branka had brought everyone into a treacherous search for the Anvil and purposefully banned Oghren from joining. While Oghren had been deep in the bottle, a noble had concluded that Branka and her house were assuredly dead, implying insult to Branka's abilities; when Oghren had challenged the noble's honour in a first-blood match, Oghren had accidentally killed the man. Oghren had then lost the last thing he could claim his own: his honour.

By the time Oghren had been given his maiden name back, he didn't have the spirit to care.

Oghren laughed at the question. "Maybe I blame myself for a lot of things. Maybe I can't stop even after hitting rock bottom, as the saying goes. Anyway, there's no rhyme or reason for my drinking. I just do."

“You’re addicted,” Carver commented, swirling his drink, “but addiction doesn’t have to be you. Actually, ignore what I said. I think I’m drunk.” He took a swig of his ale.

Oghren drunkenly watched Carver. “You carry too much weight on your shoulders, kid. I can’t believe the others said you were *withdrawn* when you wore an unmarked set of armour.” He gestured at Carver’s armour clearly embossed with the Theirin crest. There was no mistaking who Carver was, at least as a soldier. Oghren drank his ale. “You still seem reserved to me. Veterans of the Deep Roads act like that sometimes. Express some personality. Won’t talk about themselves.”

Carver deflected. “The others think I’m expressive now?”

“As much as the elf,” Oghren confirmed, “and the one they call witch, Morrigan. They don’t share details about themselves either. Stonebritches is even in denial.”

Carver choked. “About what?”

“Golems have sharp memories,” Oghren huffed. “Shale can even recall events from a thousand years ago – and she can’t remember how her last owner died? Bah.”

“She might have killed him,” Carver said. “Even insinuated it had been on purpose.”

“On accident,” Oghren corrected, downing his ale. “Which is why she actively erases the memory. She regrets it. She actually liked the company of the poor bastard and his children. Now she just talks smack.”

“Huh.” Carver stared into his drink. In comparison, Oghren didn’t speak negatively of his ex and his relatives. “You’re an honest person.”

“Don’t get mushy on me.” Oghren ordered another drink for himself, something stronger. He chuckled. “I’m hardly a dwarf anymore. I might as well follow you surfacers topside and keep swinging my axe.”

“We’re hunting the archdemon.”

Oghren spewed his drink across the table.

“I’m in charge.”



Oghren wiped his mouth. “Bemot’s beard, *what?*”

“I can have the party swing by the Circle’s docks,” Carver continued, “check up on a tavern waitress there named Felsi. I also need to make sure Dagna is settling in well at the Circle. Then we’ll head to Soldier’s Peak to start Ruck’s treatment and regroup with the northern warden forces. Yeah, that sounds like a plan.”

Oghren caught Carver’s mug before he could sip it. “I think you’ve had enough.”

## Chapter End Notes

The puzzle room to unlock the door is based on [antique trick-locked safes](#). Certain components have to be moved, depressed, or turned in harmony with each other, and like the game, I’ve made the trick-lock take up an entire room. Caridin is annoyingly intelligent.

I know it’s an unpopular opinion, but I actually like Oghren. His confession to the guardian in the Gauntlet really hit me while playing. I was glad to see him again in the Awakening DLC.

# Secret

## Chapter Notes

Just a side note, “bannorn” is both singular and plural and represents a territorial division. “The Bannorn” are specifically the territorial divisions in the central lowland region of Ferelden.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Carver subtly rubbed his temples, willing his headache away. No one else of the warden’s party wanted to check on how Duren’s conversation with his ambitious brother was going, if it had started at all. Faren was content to check on his sister, nephew, and drunk and ungrateful mother before excusing himself out of the royal palace. As an established warden, Faren could freely exchange letters with his sister from the surface. Which left Carver to determine by the end of the day if the party would have to escort Ruck to Soldier’s Peak with or without Duren.

Carver sat in the royal drawing room with Duren trying not to make more than small talk, else his alcohol-stained breath would reveal that he had recently been drinking. Carver perked up and Duren rose from his seat when the room’s doors suddenly swung open.

“Duren!” Bhelen embraced his brother on sight. “To think I would see you again! You don’t know how deeply I wept when I lost you after Trian – and father soon after.”

Duren and Bhelen were twin brothers, with Bhelen as the baby of the family. Duren had essentially raised Bhelen and himself while King Endrin had focused on preparing their significantly older brother, Trian, to succeed him as king. Duren and Bhelen had been nigh inseparable.

Had been.

“Bhelen.” Duren slowly removed himself from Bhelen’s arms. “What you’ve done, I cannot repeat. The family herbalist reported that Lady Brodens, the one who changes father’s bedsheets, had suffered a sickness a few months ago, now recovered with the help of a mage’s potion. I recognise the recipe as an antidote for the King Killer. The entire Aeducan line has suffered by *your* hand.”

“Ah.” Bhelen lowered his arms. “I knew you would make sense of

everything. You also know how Trian would have led our people, and you – you would have compromised.”

“I know.” Duren nodded. “Which is why I also know that it’s best for me to leave for the surface.”

“What!?” Bhelen looked as if he had been slapped. “Y-You just returned! If you want to send out criers with the truth, do so. I am the king, I can handle slander. Just stay with me – and your nephew. Think about your nephew!”

“I’ve had time to think,” Duren replied. “Removing me from your life was the best thing to happen to you. We have reached the point where I must remove you from mine. I will not speak out against you or stay in Orzammar where you live. I will not have my funeral, join the Legion of the Dead, and eventually pass away fighting darkspawn under your command. Peace awaits me beyond your reach.” Duren stepped away. “Long live the king.”

Bhelen grabbed Duren’s arm. “Wait, brother.”

Duren twisted his arm free and turned away.

Bhelen’s face betrayed raw panic in realisation that Duren was completely serious. The king chased after Duren and grabbed at his limbs, willing him to stop. Carver awkwardly shot up and opened the doors for Duren, vainly averting his eyes to give them privacy and wondering what he was supposed to do.

“Stay,” Bhelen’s voice shook, “please, Duren — I beg of you. I’m sorry for what I’ve done. Let me make it up to you. I-I’ll put up memorials in father’s and Trian’s names. I’ll do anything! I’ve missed you, brother. I need you!”

Bhelen hadn’t realised what he had been blessed with until he had erased his father and brothers from his life. Now at the chance to reclaim one of them, the king was trembling like a desperate child. He had forgotten what parental and fraternal love had felt like, and Duren had originally been the source of both.

Bhelen fell to his knees, anchoring himself on Duren’s legs. His crown slipped on his head. “I beg you to forgive me. I-I’m sorry, Duren. So, so sorry.”

Duren gently freed his legs. “You’re getting exactly what you wanted, Bhelen. No fathers, no siblings. Just you on the throne. This is your

punishment.” He placed a hand on Bhelen’s tear-streaked face. “I forgive you.”

Bhelen wept after Duren, collapsing to the ground with an outstretched hand. “*Duren...please! Duren!*”

Carver followed Duren out of the royal palace, the former prince quietly signalling to the guards to close the doors after them and give Bhelen space.

Duren ran a hand down his face as the two of them walked Orzammar’s streets in silence. “...Do you have siblings, Ser Carver?”

Carver paused. “An older brother and a younger twin.”

Duren glanced at him. “Are they doing well?”

“I don’t know,” Carver honestly replied. “If I had to guess——” He stopped himself.

“You seem adept at guessing,” Duren offered.

Carver swallowed. “Not well. But I also know they must be working their way through challenges. Building themselves up. I don’t think I have to worry.”

“Yet you still worry.” Duren softly commented.

Yeah, Carver still worried.

X

The warden’s party departed from Orzammar with new additions in tow. No one objected when Carver suggested that they take a break across Lake Calenhad before heading to Soldier’s Peak.

Wynne confirmed that Dagna was prospering in the Circle’s enchantment studies. There was also news of the bookish mage who had led Carver to the tower basement; the young man, Finn, had departed with a Dalish hunter of Clan Elnora seeking texts of ancient elven artefacts. Given the Wardens’ alliance with all peoples, Irving had grasped the importance of not obstructing the Dalish’s recovery of their culture. In Wynne’s absence, Irving had permitted Finn to indefinitely assist the hunter Ariane in her task. Carver side-eyed Morrigan at the news but she merely raised a brow. Hopefully that meant the witch hadn’t stolen said texts and left Ariane and Finn on

an endless search.

At one point, half of the warden's party piled on top of Shale at Lake Calenhad's docks and simply soaked up the sun and the sound of lapping water. When Oghren reunited with his first love — again and again — no one minded spending more time outside than in the tavern where they were staying.

Elissa taught Faren, Duren, and Ruck how to skip rocks across the lake. Alistair joined Sten in “training” Dog, though it more resembled playing. Zevran called Sten a big softie, quietly and not to his face. Wynne noticed Morrigan's weakness for shiny objects and showed her jewellery she had bought in Orzammar. Carver suggested they also seek Leliana's input on fashionable patterns, once they met up with her. The bard had already shared her thoughts on clothing that revealed Carver's arms.

By the time the party arrived in Soldier's Peak, they felt marginally rejuvenated from their experience in the Deep Roads.

The fortress at the top of Soldier's Peak had *transformed*.

A variety of plants from large to small had grown around and throughout the entire keep, such that they were both breathtaking *and* solidified the structure as strongly as mortar could. Trees twisted in and out of the fortress, running up walls and stretching out leafy canopies that curbed the sun and rain. The highest point of the keep was in fact a tree as large as an average Breilian oak, such that multiple stories of rooms could be carved into the tree if desired. Flowery vines like orchids grew on the sides of the trees and on their exposed roots, as long and thick as a man-made bridge. Shattered stairs were actually replaced with buffed roots that were kinder to aching knees and wheeled carts.

Underground in the fortress's ruined basement, overlapping roots and bristled berry bushes formed a natural barrier against spiders. Aside from the bushes, the fortress also hosted vegetables and fruits that grew in the dirt, off stalks, and from trees. Poison ivy guarded the fortress's borders, and seasonal plants that repelled bugs were planted throughout the fortress's livable spaces, ensuring they were bug-free all year round. Due to the fortress's entire ecosystem of plants, flowers clothed the mountaintop through every season.

Soldier's Peak had become a must-see tourist location for locals. Carver even noticed foreign merchant families crowding the open

markets of the mountain on his way up. Excited whispers rippled through the village growing at the bottom of the mountain and up its path to the fortress when the villagers realised that Elissa, Alistair, and Faren were wardens. Respect, awe, and gratitude coloured the people's faces as they waved at the party. Most of the original settlers had been escaping the population overflow in areas close to the southern Line.

At the top of the mountain, people in armour and dyed robes stood guard from the fortress's ramparts and let the warden's party in when they announced themselves. Solona and Leliana welcomed them into the keep.

"It has been too long," Leliana groaned as she picked everyone up in a hug.

Solona followed suit with one-armed hugs. "It has only been a few months."

"Too long," everyone who had travelled the Deep Roads suddenly spoke in unison.

Solona blinked.

Elissa introduced their guests, particularly Ruck and his ailment. Solona's steel-blue eyes softened as she embraced the dwarf with unconditional warmth.

"You will find peace here, brother," Solona murmured. "I swear it."

Ruck loosened in her grasp, his eyes teary. "Pretty lady speaks soft words."

"Only the truth." Solona rubbed his back.

The party caught up in the main office, which was originally Faren's and now recently Solona's. So far the wardens of Soldier's Peak were concerned, the office belonged to whoever was responsible for the keep. Solona was happy to hand it back over to Faren, who had built rapport with the former mages and werewolves composing their present forces. Solona and Faren explained to the party that the former werewolves had been the ones to redecorate the mountain. The humans knew how to encourage root systems that stabilised the earth and regulated water flow so that everything smoothly grew and worked together in harmony. Blanketing a patch of land with flowers was child's play to them.

Leliana also revealed that her past as a bard had caught up with her, to her regret. Her old mentor and lover, an Orlesian patron of arts named Marjolaine, had rallied fellow bards together and attempted to assassinate Leliana out of an unfounded fear that Leliana would strike at Marjolaine first. Several wardens in the keep had perished in the crossfire. Marjolaine had taunted Leliana till the end, hissing that Leliana was someone who sought cutthroat moral challenges because that was how Marjolaine had *made* her.

Solona had burned Marjolaine's hair off. Leliana had stabbed Marjolaine in the chest.

Elissa dismissed Leliana's apologies and expressed relief that she was alright. Letters would be sent out to the families of the fallen, and memorial services would be conducted later that month. The party took the opportunity to determine their next steps and redistribute their work. Wynne confessed she needed to rest for a while after the Deep Roads and catch her breath. Shale offered to stay with her. The golem spoke flippantly of what she had learned of herself and golems, but Shale was visibly pleased whenever she introduced herself to a former mage in the keep who wanted to adorn her in crystals.

"I am Shayle," the golem would enunciate proudly.

Elissa sent off a letter to Duncan reporting that the party had glimpsed the archdemon in the Deep Roads, though where it had gone since and where it would go in the future was a mystery. Following that, the last people group to apply the ancient treaties to was humans. When Elissa prodded Carver on the state of the bannorn, coastlands, and Denerim, he winced.

With a glance, everyone except Elissa and Alistair — the wardens assigned to Carver's mission — left the room. Carver then reluctantly shared the last reports he had received of Ferelden's political landscape: the Cousland legion split between Highever and northern highways; the Kendells legion active in the northeastern highways and meek in Denerim; and the king's army stretched thin from Denerim to Ostagar. A remnant of the Howe legion was preying on travellers in the south as bandits.

Fortunately, Queen Anora was maintaining an illusion of status quo before foreign relations, effectively watching over the kingdom in her husband's absence. The party's best bet was to show Anora the ancient treaties, thus granting both Anora and the party the legitimacy to move forward in the blight.

The two wardens stared at Carver's influence.

"Maker's breath," Alistair gaped.

"You're supervising Ferelden," Elissa realised.

Carver opened his mouth in rebuttal.

"The queen does what she can because you enable her," Elissa continued.

Alistair furrowed his brows in thought. "Knight-Commander Greagoir obviously had a hard enough time keeping track of the Circle.... Soldier's Peak is twice that size.... Solona and Faren also report to Duncan...."

"I just facilitate communication," Carver protested. "Look, I'm sharing a glimpse of my work with you because——"

"Because?" Elissa leaned in.

"I've been evaluating you two," Carver finished, "since Warden-Commander Duncan assigned you to me in Ostagar. I've come to the conclusion that you both are worthy of this level of trust."

The two wardens quieted.

"Even in the Deep Roads," Elissa murmured, "you were thinking about the mission."

Alistair sat back, stunned. "How do you even *compute* all this? How do you line up the chess pieces and come out with the best outcome? Maker, I had no idea if we were going to survive Redcliffe — never mind our search for the bloody *Anvil!*"

"I *trust* you two," Carver emphasised, "to keep what you've heard a secret."

"I'm sorry — what!?" Elissa spluttered. "The person I've been travelling with through the blight is a *super genius* keeping *Ferelden afloat*, and you expect me not to treat you differently? Or accidentally leak it to anyone?"

"I'd rather you not," Carver cut in. "Treat me differently. Or leak it. Besides, I'm no genius. Half of what I do is luck."

"No wonder you were shy in the beginning," Alistair groaned.



He was what?

"Fine." Elissa pouted. "I'll try not to show my shock at all this. But I'm telling Dog."

"Same on both," Alistair added.

X

Carver took the opportunity to survey the fortress and send out a few non-critical letters. The fortress's rookery stood as its own spire blanketed in large, flat ivy and guarded by two warden recruits. When a gentle breeze wasn't rustling leafy vines, a raven was cawing its way in or out of the rookery's peak.

"Carver," one of the guards hailed with a nod. Along with the lack of a knightly address, the guard must have been under the same assumption many others shared.

Carver halted. "Am I expected?"

If the two recruits were guarding a point of communication, it was possible that Solona had identified Carver to them as an ally who was free to walk in at any time of day or night. However, the recruits would have then known Carver's rank.

The guard shook her head. "You are the soldier who cleared the fortress with Warden Faren and the others. We mage recruits remember you."

The other guard looked over. "This is the one? He's also a warden, isn't he?"

While both guards wore straps commonly used for holding a quiver over one's shoulder, only the other guard had a quiver and bow. The first guard had a staff.

The mage recruit shook her head. "Wardens can't serve other institutions. Carver is just a soldier."

Carver glanced at the other guard. "I believe the two of us met in a forest." Zathrian had mistakenly called Carver a warden while in the company of werewolves.

The other guard's tone of agreement confirmed Carver's hunch. "How is he also a Templar then?"

The mage recruit crossed her arms proudly. “That’s just the way the song goes. Templars should endeavour to be like him.”

Carver awkwardly cut in. “Sorry, have we met?”

The mage recruit blinked. “No?”

“Right....” Carver excused himself and moved on with his tasks.

An aside with Solona shed light on the behaviour Carver began to notice. The mage recruits who had interacted with Carver during the clearing of Soldier’s Peak had apparently not been shy with what they knew of him. Their accounts had led to the mages in Soldier’s Peak sharing a common tolerance for this “Carver of the king’s army.” He had apparently been named after the Templar who had helped his mage father escape the Circle. Such kindness had not escaped this Carver, either, as he had purportedly discovered the true origins of the Templar Order and carried it in his heart. Carver was living proof that mages and non-mages could coexist harmoniously.

Solona further revealed that Carver’s deduction on the origins of the Templar Order had impacted the mage recruits’ conduct, and Solona’s time managing Soldier’s Peak had only deepened the impact. According to Solona and a few whispered claims from the recruits, suicide previously killed Kinloch Hold mages more than demons. At Soldier’s Peak without Templar surveillance, the mage recruits were now beginning to learn how to counsel their troubled and open up with each other.

The ex-werewolf recruits were a more private sort, tight-lipped on their lives before having been recruited, and indeed the idea of counselling was foreign to the mage recruits. Still, an effort could be seen. Solona and Leliana especially facilitated it.

Carver seized the chance to apologise to Solona for his conduct around her, only for Solona to return his words. The two cousins gradually but firmly reconciled, complete with Solona displaying to Carver the shapeshifting abilities she had learned from Morrigan’s wisdom. Carver warmly supported her. Having faced just one broodmother, his useless protectiveness of Solona had grown. For now, he just had to be content that Solona was alive and recovering.

He could do without her teasing about his armour. Solona had picked up a few traits from Leliana. Still, it meant much to Carver that Solona recognised he was following through on his promise to her.

The warden's party eventually settled on their composition for their journey to Denerim. Faren would stay in Soldier's Peak as the Grey Warden in Charge, in Carver's words. Since no one could grant Faren a rank, Carver drew enough of a parallel between Faren's duties and Special Agents in Charge to nickname the rogue as a GWC. Solona would also stay in Soldier's Peak to focus on her patients, Ruck and Wynne, now that Wynne's energy was fading even with the help of her spirit. Shale decided to take the opportunity to stay and work with Solona on possible ways to restore Shale to an organic body. The decision had surprised everyone except Oghren. In the meantime, Duren declared himself Ruck's guardian for the extent of Ruck's treatment.

Carver ended up leading Elissa, Alistair, Morrigan, Leliana, Sten, Zevran, and Oghren to Denerim. The wardens and villagers of Soldier's Peak waved them farewell as they departed. Cousland legionnaires ensured their safe passage through the highways. When they finally arrived at the main gate of Ferelden's capital, Carver was surprised to see a welcoming party awaiting them.

The warden's party slowed to a stop before a group of soldiers from the royal legion and one member of Maric's Shield. The soldiers except the Shielder saluted.

Carver lifted his hand. "At ease. Ser Rhiannon, I wasn't expecting this."

The grey-haired knight and the soldiers lowered their arms. "I received your letter saying you were on your way here, ser. I thought it prudent to prepare for your arrival."

Elissa stepped forward. "If it's alright, my party and I can just stay in the old Grey Warden compound here."

Rhiannon winced. "Exactly. Due to safety concerns, Ser Carver, I've approved for the residents of Denerim's alienage to move to the old warden compound. They still have access to the alienage space, of course. I understand that the wardens have relocated to a mountain in the Coastlands."

Carver's mind raced. "Who are the people who moved to the compound?"

Rhiannon shuffled a paper from the stack in her hands and held it

forward. Carver could feel the party's eyes as he accepted it.

"Hm." Carver skimmed the list of elvish names. "Do you have a political map of the compound's district?"

Elissa and the rest openly stared as Rhiannon readily provided a detailed map and presented it to Carver. The woman had expected she would need to provide insight to any of Carver's unusual and specific questions. Carver ran a finger between the old warden compound, the alienage, and the Kendells estate.

Carver glanced aside. "Warden Elissa?"

Elissa blinked. "I'm glad the compound is being put to good use. Our alternative is to stay in a tavern."

Carver handed the list of names back. "Arl Urien would also approve."

"He would?" Elissa asked, surprised.

Rhiannon took the list and shook her head in disbelief. "I don't know how you do it, Ser Carver. You were right about the half-elven girl, Amethyne—" She hesitated with a glance at the party.

Next to her, Satin smirked. "We have a lot to catch up on, Postboy. Your room in the army fortress is restored, along with cabin space for the warden's party."

Carver gestured. "Ser Charis, please escort the warden and her party to their accommodations."

Elissa picked up that the king's army had information to privately discuss, and led the party behind Charis for the army fortress. Carver followed Rhiannon and Satin to Rhiannon's office, soldiers saluting them as they passed. Satin closed the office doors behind them with confirmation that no one would be able to eavesdrop on their discussion.

Rhiannon handed her reports to Carver. "Eight years ago, Lord Vaughan had a bastard daughter with Lady Landra's lady-in-waiting, a city elf named Iona. The daughter is whom you've identified as Amethyne," Rhiannon confirmed. "Before her passing, Lady Iona had apparently raised Amethyne on the illusion that her father had died of sickness before she was born."

Carver flipped through the papers. "How was Arl Urien's response?"

“Horror,” Rhiannon admitted. “His new heir is elf-blooded. However, he has reasoned out that the alienage is part of his domain, and it wouldn’t do for him to appear incompetent in the management and protection of his arling. Arl Urien has quickly begun educating Amethyne in the ways of court and other such practices required of an heir. He considers Vaughan a failure whom he had handed off to tutors since birth. Arl Urien is thus investing himself more personally in Amethyne. The girl must be flawless as for no one to be able to find fault in his heir.”

“In the meantime,” Satin jumped in, “Teyrna Oriana’s lady-in-waiting, a Denerim native named Kallian Harthon, has left her position to participate in Amethyne’s upbringing. She is apparently one of the elves Lord Vaughan had targeted before his arrest. Lady Kallian is reported to have fought ‘savagely.’ Arl Urien has reluctantly employed her for Amethyne’s protection. On the outside, it shows the arl’s good relations with the alienage and former elven denizens.”

“Kallian, maiden name Tabris?” Carver asked.

Rhiannon scoured her papers for the answer.

Satin’s sharp memory beat her to it. “Yes. I don’t know how you keep track of all these names, Postboy.”

Carver skimmed through a report where Urien had elevated his most loyal elven servant to a steward, the Fereldan equivalent of a butler. Orlais had coined the term first from the word, “botellier.” Urien was determined to fix his family’s image. “Did Lady Kallian’s husband follow her back to Denerim? Nelaros Harthon is also a noted savage fighter.”

“The young smith?” Rhiannon clarified, astonished. “I remember him when I arrested Lord Vaughan. He seemed like a sweet young man.”

Satin barked out a laugh. “You met him when his fiancée had just escaped rape. The lad’s probably the type to smile up until he slits your throat. Yes, Nelaros moved in to the Kendells estate with Lady Kallian. In fact, the lady’s paternal cousin, Shianni Tabris, followed them back to Denerim and moved into the old warden compound with the city elves. They still tend to the vhenadahl in the alienage, but have transformed the alienage into a market square. It’s benefitting Denerim’s low-income districts.”

Carver raised a brow. He remembered reading Shianni’s name in the list of residents, but hadn’t expected the last detail. “The city elves are

maintaining the alienage's laws?"

"No weapons within its walls," Rhiannon confirmed. "Those who choose to reside in the alienage must observe a curfew. The square has become neutral grounds for merchants who lack a guild licence. The cutthroat nature of trade can't flourish under the local hahren's control. The city elves have meanwhile taken advantage of legal loopholes to live as normal citizens in the old warden compound."

Carver's memory stirred. He returned the papers to Rhiannon's desk and leaned over. "Where are Denerim's dock reports on international trade? I just want statistics on recurring merchants."

Rhiannon stood up and brought over a sheaf of papers from one of her many bookshelves.

Carver flipped through it, then back to flip again. "...*Maker*."

Rhiannon and Satin straightened. "What?"

Teyrna Oriana's merchant family had begun regularly visiting Denerim since Carver had asked her to send a letter to Empress Celene. Kallian had been Oriana's lady-in-waiting before moving to Denerim. In another timeline, Alistair or Anora would name Kallian's father or paternal cousin the first bann of the alienage.

Carver leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "Queen Anora is considering elevating the district of the old warden compound and the alienage into a bannorn."

Satin spluttered. "In *Denerim*?"

Ferelden's capital was an arling unrivalled in size, population, wealth, or importance. It was divided into only two bannorn, one directly under the old Kendells family and one under the royal Theirin family, and as the ostensible birthplace of Andraste, it held religious value for believers across southern Thedas. It was a bold move from the outset to draw a new bannorn into Denerim's map. How much more controversial for the bannorn to be created for city elves.

Carver could be making assumptions about Anora's possible connection with Celene, and by extension Briala. He would have to gather information on Orlais to confirm. Still, in another timeline, Ferelden's monarchy would elevate the alienage into a bannorn after an elven rebellion and elven trafficking. Carver doubted that the events of this timeline were dissuading the same decision.

“Ser Rhiannon, do you have a list of non-recurring merchants in the past twelve months?”

Rhiannon shared the reports. Tevinter names had docked in Denerim for a brief frequency before coinciding with the arrival of Oriana’s merchant family. Either Fergus Cousland’s connections to his mother’s side of the family had seen to banning slavers from entering Ferelden, or the connections in Oriana’s side of the family had done so.

Carver’s head spun. Events were occurring outside of Carver’s involvement. He had expected it, but not to this extent.

Carver refocused. “A new bannorn is still far in the future. Ferelden is hurting from the animosity between the Couslands, Kendells, and Howes. Ser Rhiannon, I had tasked Basket with searching for Arl Rendon in the south, and expanding north with your assistance. How’s the search faring?”

Rhiannon despondently shook her head. “The Howe legion has evidently split into groups of bandits up and down the highways. The Cousland soldiers are pushing for more freedom to pursue criminals and hunt down Arl Rendon. I’ve explained to them that it’s beyond their jurisdiction.”

Carver grabbed a quill and a blank parchment. “I’m transferring leadership of the search to you. How much do you have on your plate?”

Rhiannon lit a wax stick and held it over the slip of parchment. “I’m delegating to Ser Cauthrien’s army of secretaries, ser. You can trust me with the search.”

Carver took out a stamp from his pouch and pressed it into the small puddle that dripped from the wax. Maric’s Shield wasn’t considered Ferelden’s elite force for nothing. They were the only people outside of the king and queen allowed to wear and bear the Theirin crest. It meant they weren’t allowed to die in combat without destroying their royal stamp first.

Carver set the parchment aside to cool. “How have the Bannorn reacted to Arl Rendon’s attack on Highever?”

Rhiannon snorted. “Bann Loren vocally condemned Arl Rendon for his betrayal against an old friend out of greed and envy – and in the midst of a blight. The Bannorn houses that aren’t swept up in shock and disgust are at most apathetic, seeing as Bann Loren is infamous for his

fickle allegiance. However, the burning of Highever is the biggest scandal we've had in the past five years. Bann Loren and his wife had support when they fought bitterly for custody over Amethyne right up till the moment they lost."

Carver pinched his nose bridge. If he was feeling arrogant, he could believe he had created the mess. He had a responsibility to fix it.

"Ser Rhiannon," Carver straightened, "you've performed most if not all responsibilities above your level. You can expect a promotion soon. I'll put in a good word to Teyrn Loghain."

Rhiannon spluttered. "At my age, joining *Maric's Shield*—?"

"Just take it," Satin laughed. "Think of the benefits."

The grey-haired woman slumped. "Thank you, Ser Carver."

"Don't sound too excited." Carver's lips quirked. "Why don't you take time to meditate on this, Ser Rhiannon? Take a break from the office."

Rhiannon nodded in understanding and closed the door behind her.

Carver sighed and lowered his voice. "Did Queen Anora notice?"

Satin smugly leaned against Rhiannon's desk. "I slipped the ashes into her dinner wine – she drinks the strong stuff towards the end of the day. It should've hidden the taste. Her Majesty didn't even bat an eye."

Carver leaned back in his chair and threw an arm over his tired eyes. "Good. I have to see her tomorrow with the wardens."

Satin watched him. "How are you feeling, Postboy?"

"Why does everyone want to ask me that?" Carver grouched.

"You haven't taken a breather since Ostagar," Satin listed. "You're trying to fill in for Ser Cauthrien. You're allergic to feelings."

Carver huffed. "Do you talk to all of your superiors like this?"

"Oh, yeah. Teyrn Loghain loves assigning me laps during training."

"I'm *fine*," Carver stated.

Satin tapped Carver's hand as it closed. "Right. I know we're all



swamped, but do you want me to check on your sister for you? Bethany?"

Carver's lips twisted. The Hawkes were someone else's only family in the entire world, and in the process of witnessing people die or lose loved ones, someone else had grown to miss them terribly. However, the reality was that the original Carver was in the Fade.

Someone else felt like a horrible thief. The idea of seeing the Hawkes in any capacity threatened to crush their lungs with guilt.

"No, then." Satin faltered.

"Go the Starkhaven," Carver muttered. "Arl Rendon's eldest, Nathaniel Howe, should be training under his mother's cousin, a chevalier named Rodolphe Varley. The arling of Amaranthine needs a lord. Swing by Kirkwall along the way."

Satin stood up and headed for the door. "What should I look for there?"

Carver sighed. "Garrett Hawke. My older brother."

Satin spluttered. "Maker, there are *more* of you? This I have to see!"

Carver lowered the arm over his eyes and shot up in his chair. "Don't tell him about me – don't even make contact with him. Ever since our father died, Garrett has been the family breadwinner. How he's faring in Kirkwall determines how my mother and sister are faring. We didn't part on the best of terms." Carver ran a hand down his face. "It was my fault."

"You prioritise work over family." Satin nodded in understanding. "You're not the first I've seen, just the youngest." He bumped his leg against Carver's knee. "I'll check on your family and bring back your noble. You can count on me."

"Thank you, Satin."

## Chapter End Notes

Bhelen seems like someone who can behave genuinely loving, but ultimately prioritises his political agenda. I tried to capture that in how he treated the Dwarf Noble (Duren) and the Dwarf Commoner (Faren) origins. In comparison, someone else pursues political agendas, but they care about the people important to

them more. However, they struggle with expressing themselves without blurting out the fact that they're a transmigrator who "knows the future" because the world should be a video game. Life sucks.

# Four People

## Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for commenting, I read it all! I'm touched if you write even nonsense, knowing you skipped sleep just to read my humble fic. I appreciate everyone's support!

Queen Anora contemplated the ancient treaties from her throne. The warden's party stood before her.

"The blight troubles us all," Anora stated. "I agree that our nobility should obediently march across Ferelden for the archdemon. There are houses, however, who behave as if this isn't their greatest priority." Anora handed the treaties back to Elissa. "Yours included."

Alistair accepted the treaties while Elissa bristled. "Arl Rendon was the first to step out of line with his desertion and treachery."

"Warden," Anora coolly addressed, "your past actions reflect a common sense for what our nation should focus on. Perhaps you should convince your brother to cease accosting my soldiers over Arl Rendon."

"Your Majesty," Elissa grit her teeth, "isn't that *your* j—"

"What she means," Alistair cut in, "is that you are the queen, the one who rules in the king's absence. Ferelden's nobility will move when you command it."

Anora folded her hands in her lap. "Yes, and if they don't move, they will have committed treason. I have blessed the nobility with my patience, but even sovereigns wear out over time."

Carver tensed. Sovereigns were the Ferelden form of currency. Anora was comparing her good will to gold that she was growing tired of spending. She was also admitting that monarchs were only human, and the stress of conflict was starting to affect her.

"I plan to call a Landsmeet," Anora continued, gesturing to the throne room's doors. "I suggest you speak to Teyrn Fergus and the other lords. When they arrive in Denerim, I *expect* them to respect these treaties as I do. You are dismissed."

"Your Majesty." Carver stepped forward. "Pardon my interruption. I

am Carver of Lothing, knight of Maric's Shield."

Anora quirked a brow at him as if sharing a joke. "I know who you are, *soldier*. Speak."

Carver coughed. Anora had *definitely* been in contact with Oriana. "We can all agree that the nobles should be united while we battle a war. You wouldn't have granted us an audience otherwise. I humbly speak as a soldier who fought in the clash at Ostagar and has since journeyed with Warden Elissa and Alistair to unite all peoples and search for the archdemon."

Anora flicked her hand, permitting him to proceed.

Carver straightened. "The wardens, Arl Urien, and I personally experienced the archdemon's power in Ostagar. That is why Arl Urien left the Line for Denerim; he recognises that certain matters must be settled among our nobility before we can best eradicate darkspawn and their god from our lands. The Couslands have meanwhile suffered before even setting foot into a battlefield. They don't know if they can trust anyone, even old friends, anymore. A Landsmeet indeed grants Ferelden's nobility the opportunity to settle matters; however, it wouldn't be complete without an arl of Amaranthine."

Anora shifted in her throne. "Oh, this is bound to be interesting. Continue."

"Nathaniel Howe is on his way here," Carver revealed, "Arl Rendon's eldest and – despite Arl Rendon's best efforts – the rightful heir to Amaranthine. His younger sister, Delilah Howe, should already be in Denerim."

Behind Anora's throne, her guards murmured amongst themselves. "Word is that Arl Rendon's two eldest take after Arlessa Eliane."

The saintly Eliane Howe had been much loved before her passing many years ago. The lady was largely responsible for why other lords had tolerated her husband in court.

Anora tilted her head, the guards shushing. Technically, they were only supposed to stand guard, not gossip. "Lady Delilah ran away from Amaranthine years ago. Arl Rendon had declared a hefty price for her return."

To keep up appearances.

Carver neutrally hummed. “The royal legion will find her in Denerim’s market district. She is married to a shopkeeper named Albert, and should be four months pregnant with his child now. Your Majesty, I suggest that the tensions in our nobility be settled through a solution as old as time: a union between the Couslands and Kendells, and the Couslands and Howes.”

Anora barked out a laugh.

That...was a good thing, right?

The intimidating queen sighed, smirking. “You speak of Lord Oren Cousland and Lady Amethyne Kendells. Teyrn Fergus and Teyrna Oriana must then soon have a child to unite with Lady Delilah’s unborn child.”

“Maker,” Elissa blurted, “that might actually work.”

“If Nathaniel Howe is accepted as the new arl of Amaranthine,” Carver allowed, “and agrees to commit his sister’s child to the union. Although, the Howes and Kendells aren’t in any position to refuse compensation to the Couslands.”

Anora laced her fingers. “Arl Leonas will attend the Landsmeet as the arl of the South Reach. If Arlessa Eliane’s brother and Arl Rendon’s greatest critic can get behind Lord Nathaniel, then I believe the other lords will follow suit. Hm...your advice has been heard, Ser Carver. Dismissed.”

The warden’s party turned to leave the throne room. Carver internally sweated.

Nathaniel had *better* impress Arl Leonas.

It didn’t matter that Arl Rendon had married Leonas’s sister for her money — and bluntly said so to Leonas. It didn’t matter that Leonas had loathed Rendon for misleading and using his sister so much that Leonas had severed all contact with his sister and her husband. The Couslands were enraged and paranoid, and nothing short of arranged marriage was going to appease them. In such delicate circumstances, the genders of Lady Oriana’s and the Couslands’ future children were irrelevant before the necessity to unite their houses.

Outside the palace grounds, Elissa collapsed into a bench. “How am I supposed to convince my brother to postpone his pursuit of vengeance against Arl Rendon – with or without the promise of arranged

marriage? Father, mother, please forgive your daughter; I'm going to end up visiting Fergus in jail by the end of the year."

"We don't know that will happen," Alistair reasoned. "Maybe Carver is right, as he always is, and this will all work out."

Carver frowned. "I'm not always right."

Morrigan giggled. "'Tis the self-doubt speaking."

Leliana giggled in agreement.

"Bullied." Carver morosely joined Elissa on the bench. "I'm being bullied."

"While you two contemplate life," Oghren commented, "I'm gonna hit a tavern and try human ale."

Alistair perked up. "I'll follow you." At everyone's surprise, he explained, "My sister on my mother's side apparently lives in the area. I want to introduce myself to her, maybe connect...though I admit I'm nervous. Actually, Oghren, would you—"

The berserker waved his hands in front of him. "Oh no, I'm not involving myself in any more family nonsense."

Elissa rose from the bench. "I won't accomplish anything by sitting around. I would happily meet your sister with you."

Alistair scratched the back of his head shyly. "Thank you. I guess after this, I'd end up meeting your family, too."

The words slowly registered.

Alistair pivoted and marched off with red ears. "Actually, forget what I said."

Elissa chased after him with pink cheeks. "Wait, Alistair!"

The rest of the party watched the wardens disappear into the crowded streets, Dog scuttling after them with playful yips.

Leliana sighed sweetly. "They have been consummating their feelings, and now Alistair is jumping ahead to marriage. Their love is as clumsy and pure as a newborn puppy."

Morrigan's face twisted in disgust. "Mayhaps I should follow you,

dwarf, and stain my tongue with ale.”

Leliana, Sten, Zevran, and Carver watched Morrigan and Oghren depart for a tavern.

Carver blinked. “Alistair and Elissa confessed their feelings?”

Sten grumbled. “You’re a heavy sleeper.”

Carver flushed. “Those two just started holding hands back in Haven. When did they have time to build affection in the Deep Roads?”

“Not much,” Zevran provided, “but our boy Alistair plucked a rose when we were by Lake Calenhad and gifted it to Elissa. I believe his words were, ‘I can’t live without you.’ Those two spent nearly as much time in the tavern as Oghren.”

Carver immediately shook the image from his head as quickly as it formed. He didn’t want to see such things about people he basically thought about as family. In the sense that it would be gross.

He wasn’t *that* close with them. He couldn’t be, given how closed off he was.

Carver tracked down a signpost. “We might as well make use of this time and bring our drake and dragon scales to Wade’s Emporium. He’s a skilled blacksmith.”

“We’re in Ferelden’s busiest market,” Leliana pointed out. “I’m going to take the time to find Solo and I a new pair of shoes that aren’t clunky and muddy.”

Sten scoffed. “You’re in Ferelden. It will always be muddy.”

Carver side-eyed him. “Hey, I’m from here.”

Zevran nodded next to Sten. “It will also always smell of dog.”

Carver gave up and headed towards Wade’s Emporium, the party following behind him as they discussed the sights and smells of Orlais, Seheron, and Antiva. To be honest, Carver had a personal curiosity about the countries, having spent his recent thirteen years in armpit nowhere and the last four in the rest of Ferelden. In a way, the only other country he had visited in this life was Orzammar, which had been a culture shock of its own.

Carver paused and turned to face the rest of the party. “Leliana...if

you want to go shoe shopping, feel free to do so. Don't let us boys dissuade you."

"Here it comes," Zevran commented. "You utter one whimsical comment, and he returns six months later with a gift."

"You're all homesick," Carver defended. He knew what that felt like better than anyone else.

Leliana squeezed his arm with a gentle smile. "That's very thoughtful of you, Carver, but you don't have to. We wouldn't have followed you and the wardens across Ferelden if we hadn't *wanted* to." She paused, then teasingly shrugged at Zevran. "Except him."

Carver revealed a flower he had plucked while on the road. "That's a shame. I was going to give you this."

Leliana's eyes widened as she picked up the flower. "Andraste's Grace. Oh, you remember I said it smells like memories of my mother!"

Carver shifted. "Not to be misleading, but while I value our shared trust, I can live without you."

Leliana grinned. "I harbour no romantic feelings for you, either."

Sten grouched. "The bard taints her surroundings with sentiment."

"You big softie," Leliana swiftly accused. "I saw you playing with a stray kitten the other day."

"I was training it," Sten vainly dismissed.

The light flow of their conversation halted before the sight of a chantry. Carver glanced at Leliana.

The bard caught it. "I'm at peace with where I am." Leliana smiled assuredly. "Who I am."

Zevran nodded. "You killed your past with a knife. That is a certainty you can't buy — though I wonder if you would also consider revising your position in the chantry, Sister Leliana. Or at least its customs."

Sten side-eyed him. "This is about how you once wished to be a brother because you wanted to drink all day."

Leliana clicked her tongue. "*Antivan* chantries make wine, and even so, the clergy doesn't pass time drinking, Zevran. We have work and



prayer."

Zevran gazed up at her with round eyes. "So you're still dedicated to being a sister? As a fellow murderer, I think that would be a shame."

Carver flatly shot Zevran a look. *Wording.*

Leliana's face twisted with visible struggle. She couldn't escape a bardic mindset, and at the time of the guardian's query, she had been oscillating between her Andrastian faith and lying to herself. How she felt after killing her former lover with help from her current one was a mystery.

And none of the men's business.

Carver cleared his throat, grasping for a distraction besides the chantry blatantly in front of them. "Uh, shoes—"

"I accept my inclinations," Leliana stated with certainty. "Marjolaine may have been the one to help me discover them, but *I've* decided to keep using my skills. While I know not what lies in the future, I know the Maker is positioning me for it."

Leliana smiled at them. "My faith isn't a falsehood. Solo reminded me that regardless of why I became a Chantry sister, my devotion is what helped her out of her immediate trauma from surviving broodmothers. My belief is meaningful to more than just me."

X

Carver, Sten, and Zevran ended up alone together by the end of the day. Leliana had excused herself to quietly pray in the local chantry, though she had extended an invitation for them to join her in the market if they saw her afterwards. It left Carver to continue down his laundry list of cleaning up Denerim.

Zevran watched Carver drop off a painted box in front of an unremarkable door. "Is this why the soldier of Maric's Shield calls you Postboy?"

Carver closed the lid of the barrel he had placed the box in. "He isn't the only one."

Sten followed them as Carver pivoted for another direction. "You gather information on foot, when you could order a Sten to do so."

Carver knocked on a door. “Some information becomes actionable in the field.”

When no one behind the door responded, Carver glanced both ways before kicking the door down.

Zevran and Sten immediately drew their weapons, conditioned at this point. A Tal-Vashoth mercenary group leapt at them from inside the building, but Carver nullified their attacks with surgical redirection as Sten had taught him.

“Peace,” Carver stated. “I just want to ask questions.”

A female mercenary drew an arrow at him. Another mercenary quickly lowered a hand at her. “That’s Maric’s Shield,” her ally discouraged in the same tone of, “we don’t kill police.”

The vashoth archer scowled. “You sound unconvincing, geared up like that.”

Carver lowered Summer Sword. “Your mercenary band is called the Word of Kadan-Fe. You pick up jobs regardless of their moral direction. Ordinarily, I would just kill you, but I’m giving you the opportunity to leave Ferelden’s borders and never return.”

A mercenary spluttered. “Where’s the question?”

Carver focused on their body language. “Were you hired here by Arl Rendon Howe?”

The archer shrugged. “Yes, and?”

“Where’s Ambassador Gainley?” Carver asked.

“The Pearl.”

Carver stepped aside the door. “Thank you. I don’t like cleaning up blood or writing up reports. Watch your back on your way out.”

The mercenary group frowned as they left their hideout. “Don’t you mean our step?”

Zevran perked up as Carver dismissed the mercenaries. “The Pearl is Denerim’s most profitable brothel.”

Sten glanced at him. “You wish to de-stress. Right now.”

“Always,” Zevran teased.

“Servants to Arl Rendon are prime prey in these times,” Carver commented as they navigated alleyways for the brothel. “They attract assassination contracts. I just wish Teyrna Oriana wouldn’t enable her husband so much.” Jurisdictional restrictions didn’t justify creating headaches for Carver.

Zevran blinked. “Oriana is an Antivan name.”

The three males nearly tripped over a rush of children running after a ball without looking both ways. The imps barely noticed their rudeness as they excitedly yelled.

“Which Carver are you this time?” the children giggled amongst themselves. “Wolfsbane or Warden?”

One of the children kicked the ball into an empty fish basket. “I’m *Ser* Carver, the knight!”

“Stop, rascals!” a fishmonger shook their fist.

The children scattered, cackling.

A street urchin ran up to Carver and tugged on his sleeve with dirty fingers. “The Pearl, Room 1 — be there.”

Carver spluttered, ambushed by what he was experiencing. “Who—”

The urchin dashed off without waiting on a response.

Carver stared.

Sten pointed. “The children appear to believe you are three people.”

Carver scrubbed his face. “I’m just one *boring* one. How on earth....”

Wait.

Carver hurried the group to the Pearl, whereupon entering, alluring sights, smells, and sounds greeted them. A minstrel in a corner strummed their lute to the tune of a courageous Templar cutting down undead with one hand and curing a possessed child with another.

The Templar’s name was Carver.

“*Leliana*,” Carver hissed under his breath.

The bard had apparently made full use of her time in Soldier's Peak not just supervising its chantry, but contributing to the villagers' music selection. Carver could already hear her reasoning. Something along the lines of healing hearts and minds with song, or casting light in dark times. Carver could do without being Leliana's sacrifice.

Patrons and employees of the brothel sang and clapped along with the minstrel, raising their voices and drinks on the climax. The brothel clerk barely batted an eye at Carver, Sten, and Zevran's arrival, merely humming the next chorus. Carver waved aside her offer to find them a room and navigated to the farthest one. Zevran pointed at Room 1 as they passed it, but made no comment.

Carver jiggled a door handle to no avail. Zevran moved in to lockpick it open.

The door swung in to reveal a room full of Howe soldiers in bandit garb with drawn weapons.

Sten unsheathed Asala and skewered two soldiers in one strike. "Are you picking a fight with the entire *city*?"

Carver beheaded two more with one slash. "I'm just cleaning up!"

The three of them made bloody work of the soldiers who had been using a corner of the brothel as a hideout. The room's silks ended up completely ruined, but Carver had prepared sovereigns for compensation. It helped when the three of them then did the exact same thing in the next room where Gainsley had been shuffling through his collection of blackmail and bribes on foreign ambassadors, determined to find the Howe legion a refuge outside of Ferelden. Carver bound the material in twine and stuffed them into his pouch, separating a few coins from the bribe money for accidentally ruining the bed. The Pearl's back rooms wouldn't be usable for a while.

Carver dropped off the money with the clerk, then finally knocked on Room 1's door. A mellow, polite voice allowed them in.

Zevran tensed and stepped up to Carver's side as the door closed behind them. The room's occupant gestured for them to take a seat by the room's brazier with him, unfazed by the manifestation of daggers in Zevran's hands.

"I expect you are assisting the Cousland warden," the stranger greeted.

"Save us the act," Zevran curtly replied. "Carver, this man is an

Antivan Crow. Though I suppose you already knew that.”

The stranger passively accepted the accusation. “I offer a mutually beneficial situation where I can more easily organise deaths without a direct link to myself. The Cousland warden, I understand, has no love for the Howe legion. Of course, your assisting efforts will be appropriately compensated.”

“Ignacio.” Carver leaned forward on his knees. “Is your surname Arainai?”

For once, the stranger looked ruffled. Then he resigned himself to the strange fact that Carver knew his first name. “No. The contracts of another house are none of my business. I am a professional, like any Crow.” He glanced at Zevran. “I recognise you, Zevran Arainai. The guildmaster of your house has sent Taliesen to verify if you failed your last contract.”

And to kill Zevran if he still lived.

Zevran’s shoulders tensed. “I never expected to return to Antiva alive, but I can appreciate a tip.”

Ignacio didn’t care if Zevran — or any of them — lived or died. He looked at Carver. “Will you help me with my contracts?”

Carver showed the plaques he had taken from the rooms he, Sten, and Zevran had cleared out of Howe affiliates.

Ignacio accepted them, only partially unruffled this time. “...You already knew. This saves me the time of organising a fatal food allergy for two rooms of paranoid targets.”

“The Kadan-Fe are on their way out of Ferelden,” Carver shared, “though I’m sure you’ve prepared an unfortunate dock accident. As a soldier of the king’s army, I would prefer the accident isn’t costly.”

Ignacio considered it. “Compensation, then. I have only one more contract.” He retrieved a scroll from his things.

“Howe soldiers have taken a noble’s son as hostage and demanded a ransom,” Carver guessed. “The Crows have already covertly rescued the boy and returned him to his father. I just need to kill the soldiers.”

Ignacio handed over the scroll listing the contract’s full details, including a time and location. “Since you seem to know the job

already,” Ignacio explained.

Zevran accepted the scroll before Carver could reach out, and pointedly examined it for falsities, venomous ink, and other possible tricks. Ignacio patiently folded his hands in his lap — and in sight. It didn’t matter that Ignacio was outnumbered, with the numbers consisting of a venom-resistant qunari, a fellow Crow, and an elite knight. Ignacio relaxed in his seat like he was exactly where he should be.

Carver frowned, only assuaged by his foreknowledge. “The payment for this job....”

Ignacio gestured to the bedroom’s bench. “I have gloves crafted by Antivan tanners.”

“...Will be information,” Carver cut in.

Ignacio’s lips twitched downwards in betrayal.

Zevran smirked, showing off his hands. “We have no need for extra gloves.”

Ignacio’s voice flattened. “You demand an unbalanced deal.”

“From one perspective,” Carver dismissed. “From another, advantageous. I would like to know when and where to expect Taliesen and any hired muscle he might bring with him. Meanwhile, I understand the Crows promote competition between houses — refines your institution’s skill, presumably. Refines your numbers.”

Ignacio’s gaze slid from Carver to Zevran. “...House Arainai has been cursed since meeting you.”

Zevran raised his brows innocently. “I’ve been its greatest addition.”

“I wasn’t speaking of you,” Ignacio primly stated. He stood up, and everyone warily leapt up from their seats. “Taliesen has attracted ten Howe soldiers with money. The eleven of them haunt Denerim’s back alleys at day, and streets at night.”

Carver hesitated, then wordlessly left through the door, Sten and Zevran following him. The ransom point was at the edge of the noble district, a considerable distance, and as the three of them headed towards it, dusk fell.

Carver glanced aside. “Zevran, when you attacked Warden Elissa and the rest of us, you hired bandits to help you, right?”

Zevran tilted his head at the statement. “I did.”

Carver continued. “Did those bandits have contracts on them?”

Zevran shrugged. “I didn’t want to seem like I *wasn’t* trying to kill Elissa. If I fell or vanished in battle against my mark and alongside other ones, then I wouldn’t be suspected of attempting to leave the Crows.” By indirect suicide. Zevran looked at Carver. “You suspect what we already know. Taliesen will come at me with disposable numbers.”

The ten Howe soldiers had contracts on them. Taliesen had never planned to pay for their help — whether by Taliesen killing them, or a resistant Zevran doing so. At the end of the day, Taliesen was going to return to Antiva with a full wallet and his tasks complete.

The Crows were *deadly* efficient.

Then again...

So was Carver.

The chaos wracked by the Howe legion *was* going to be neutralised — whether by Ser Rhiannon’s command, or by a certain merchant family’s money. Carver simply chose to further benefit by extracting information from Ignacio. The warden’s party couldn’t afford to be ambushed on the streets by Taliesen and his fodder. There was a blight to end.

Carver hummed. “If your house’s guildmaster sent Taliesen after you, he must be skilled.”

Zevran chuckled. “Taliessen’s ‘skill’ lies in his loyalty. He will sooner risk death before failing a task from Guildmaster Eoman. It is how Taliessen survived Crow training.”

Sten spoke up. “You two trained together?”

Zevran fluttered a hand. “We were the only two recruits of our year to see our next birthday. Me thanks to my talent, him thanks to his stubborn determination. I could hardly not learn the name of my only other ‘graduate,’ however unremarkable.”

Sten grumbled. “It’s a waste to train warriors into the ground.”

Zevran teased him. “Evidently, the Crows and the Qunari practice different philosophies.”

Sten shook his head. “Regardless, I see where Karasten stands. We would benefit from any insight towards how this Taliesen would conduct an ambush. ...I suspect with fewer trees.”

Zevran placed a hand over his chest. “You wound me, my towering friend. Alas, Denerim lacks convenient vegetation, so we can expect a mere venomous dagger from the dark before any close-quarter combat.”

“Taliesen prefers to weaken a mark before striking,” Carver acknowledged. “His hired muscle will simultaneously seal off exits. Sensible. Zevran, are you alright with facing Taliesen in a fight?”

Zevran quirked a brow. “Worry not, Carver; there is no doubt that Taliesen will strike to kill without giving us a chance to flee, but I have more than enough skill to do the same to him.”

Carver reluctantly nodded as they continued forth. He was concerned for precisely that reason. Taliesen wasn’t as professionally cold as Zevran was expecting.

Talent couldn’t always trump determination.

Eventually, Carver, Sten, and Zevran cut through the Howe soldiers waiting at the ransom point, then passed through Denerim’s market to recognise that Leliana had likely retreated to the army fortress for the night. A swing by Wade’s Emporium also confirmed that a set of drake and dragon scale armour was in the works. As the three of them trudged for the army fortress, the streets emptied of people. With the fortress’s top floors in sight, nightly danger was unlikely, but the hair on Carver’s arms slowly rose. There was no mistaking him for a Shielder, and the possibility of someone on the street targeting him for it wasn’t null. Running a city didn’t make *everyone* happy.

Carver slipped his helmet on at the same time Sten’s and Zevran’s hands strayed to their weapons in his periphery.

Their echoing footsteps seamlessly multiplied.

Then their shadows.



A lithe silhouette peeled off the corner of a building and slunk for them, raising its spine, until a beautiful, confident man stepped into the moon's harsh glare. Even from afar, Carver could count his eyelashes. As Carver, Sten, and Zevran stopped, they could count the bandits surrounding them, too.

Ten total.

There was no dagger from the dark, no sudden ambush.

Just a caring smile as Taliesen's thick lips curled endearingly. "Zev, it's time to come home."

# Friend

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Taliesen,” Zevran breathed.

The man’s eyes crinkled at Zevran. A Spanish-Italian dialect suddenly flowed from his lips like a refreshing stream, every other syllable leaping with fondness. Then Taliesen gestured behind him, and the ring of bandits around Carver, Sten, and Zevran abruptly twitched to strike.

“Oh,” Taliesen chuckled, breezing through an introduction in Common. “Don’t mind them, Zev. They’re just here to help me with a contract. I’ve been assigned the little bird standing behind you.”

Zevran turned to meet Carver’s eyes. His gaze trailed down to Carver’s hand resting on Summer Sword yet not unsheathing it, then past Carver to where Sten hadn’t drawn Asala either. It was evident that Zevran belatedly realised he hadn’t drawn weapons at Taliesen despite the fact he had reflexively done so at Ignacio. Even though it risked their safety, Carver and Sten hadn’t either. Carver was letting Zevran lead, with Sten following suit. It was a decision afforded by their experiences together.

They trusted Zevran.

Zevran turned to face Taliesen again. “You don’t have a contract on these bandits themselves? Their armour bears the worn markings of the Howe legion.”

Taliesen responded in dismissive Antivan, and the bandits shifted uneasily.

One of the bandits demanded, “What are you saying?”

Carver, meanwhile, felt his head explode. Of *course* Taliesen had a contract on the bandits he was using — just like he had one on Carver. While Carver and the former Howe soldiers fought each other to death, Taliesen could flit off to Antiva with his dear Zevran in tow and feed House Arainai’s guildmaster an excuse to pardon Zevran from execution. Taliesen had lined up his three tasks to be completed in one fell swoop. Like Ignacio, the darn assassin could only be

encountered in a situation set up for him to win.

Here Carver was, investing his best efforts to keep up with Ferelden's problems, while the assassins in Antiva were playing *3D chess*.

Taliesen sighed. "I was telling *my fellow Crow* here that my priority is the boy knight you fallen soldiers hate so much."

The bandits drew their weapons. "That just means you'll kill *us* after *him!*"

Zevran nodded. "And *I* was saying that I've sworn an oath."

"—***What?***" Taliesen whiplashed.

Zevran slowly drew his shortsworads, and Carver and Sten swiftly imitated him. "I've promised to protect my charge until I die or until he chooses to release me from my oath."

It was Carver's turn to look at Zevran in shock. "He? As in Warden Elissa?"

Zevran cheekily smirked at him. "You were there, Carver."

"No," Carver immediately rejected. "*No way*. Your life is your own — and no one else's, Zevran. You have no master but yourself. I release you from your oath."

"I thought you would say that," Zevran admitted, "though you must have noticed at one point that I would always shadow you when I could."

"Zevran," Carver pleaded, "don't force yourself into a *blight* for one person. Live for yourself!"

Zevran chuckled. "In the beginning, I *wanted* death. Only my oath kept me living, gave me time to realise how much someone can miss their homeland. The sights, the smells...." He lifted his gaze to Taliesen. "... The people."

Every word struck Carver like a physical blow in empathy.

Zevran continued. "Now I recognise that I'm someone else. I've changed. I don't *live* because of my oath — the time I've spent with the warden's party has taught me how to be *alive*. I pity you, Taliesen. The Crows' loyalty reward system can't substitute for love and support from others. I have people in my life who will never blame me for

failing to meet an expectation, and will fight at my back till they draw their last. They take me as I am — and I too prefer them as they are. Should we encounter danger, we will stand together without having to speak a word.”

Zevran readied a stance. “Just as we do now.”

Taliesen’s lips twisted regretfully. He responded in their shared language.

“I will see Antiva again,” Zevran agreed, “as *alive* as I am now. Which means I won’t return as a mindless Assassin.”

Zevran was referencing the lowest rank in the Antivan Crows whose only function was to obey their superiors. Disobedience was rewarded with death.

The statement shocked Common out of Taliesen. “Have you picked up ambition while in Ferelden, Zev!? Aiming to rise to a Master — or Guildmaster!?”

Zevran shook his head. “At whatever point I will return, change will inevitably occur in the Crows. I’m different now. The Guildmasters, Masters, and my fellow Assassins like you will try to ‘neutralise’ my behaviour. No, Taliesen; the day Zevran Arainai returns to Antiva is the day House Arainai earns a new *Talon*.”

*Maker’s breath.*

Carver remembered how Zevran had once described Antiva’s national defence:

*The Talon of the Navy Staff.*

*The Talon of the Defence Staff.*

Eight titles in total, each held by one of the Crows’ strongest houses. And where did House Arainai stand, exactly? By Zevran’s words, it seemed to have a Talon whom he intended to replace.

Either way, Zevran obviously didn’t care. He didn’t intend to revert to the person he had once been.

Taliesen came to the same conclusion as he swiftly threw a dagger that Zevran deflected. The street instantly burst with action.

Carver pointed with Summer Sword. “I have the five on the right!”

Sten jabbed with Asala, skewering a bandit. “Then I have the left.”

Carver and Sten darted past each other and swung their swords, splitting the air. Compared to darkspawn in the Deep Roads, a handful of rogue soldiers in a city street were no more than tissue paper. The Howe loyalists in fact surprised Carver with their tenacity to lunge at the two of them. Rendon Howe had evidently paid the Crows for Carver’s head out of sheer spite despite being on the run and wanting for money — though in all likelihood, Carver was simply more affordable to kill than the Couslands. The former Howe soldiers were expressing a rage that overrode their fear or any such rationality.

A bandit suddenly cried out before Carver’s blade cleaved through him, and Sten and Carver warily refocused on their surroundings. Taliesen and Zevran were locked in a dance of flashing steel caught by the moon — their movements were otherwise invisible. Zevran’s nimble footwork revealed that Taliesen had tossed caltrops in front of him and complicated the terrain between him and the bandits.

Sten picked up and threw a dead bandit over the caltrops.

Carver stepped on the corpse and leapt for the other side.

Taliesen cursed in surprise as Carver swung through where his head had been, Taliesen barely parrying a strike from Zevran. Past the latter, Sten could be seen throwing another body over the caltrops to allow Sten a clear path without having to jump.

Taliesen scowled at Zevran. “You were a good assassin.”

Zevran redirected a blade to the ground. “You always cheated.”

A shortsword split Taliesen’s neck open at the same time a dagger nicked Carver’s neck. They both fell.

“*Braska* — Sten!” Zevran swore.

Carver felt a fire bloom down his neck with white-hot agony as Sten ran into view. The qunari tore Carver’s helmet off and leaned down to suck the venom out of his neck, spitting aside to repeat the process. Zevran hurried over and inserted a needle in Carver’s neck before removing it.

Immediately, air sucked back into Carver’s lungs. He focused all his

thoughts on breathing. “Army...fortress....”

“Right.” Sten grabbed Carver’s arm and swung it over his shoulder, then hauled him up on his feet. The qunari dragged Carver to the army fortress as Zevran quickly cleared the way.

When they arrived in the barracks, some of the warden’s party had been startled awake. At first, they didn’t grasp the severity of Carver’s limp form; Sten often carried a party member around to help with a sprained ankle before a mage could heal it.

Morrigan quirked a brow at the bruise on Carver’s neck. “...Dare I ask?”

Alistair blushed. “I heard there was a commotion in a nearby brothel.”

Carver gasped, “This...Sten....”

Said qunari dumped Carver on a bed.

Alistair spluttered. “Wouldn’t have been my first guess——“

The open cut in Carver’s bruise could be clearly seen by the new angle. The rest of the party jumped to their feet.

“What happened!?” Elissa gaped.

Zevran crossed gazes with Elissa. “My past.”

Elissa straightened in recognition and hastily left for another room in the barracks that the warden’s party had occupied. She returned with Leliana in tow holding a wooden box. Leliana smoothly drew a chair up next to Carver and opened the box to reveal a poisoner’s kit, while Zevran quickly joined her with his own tools. They hurriedly relieved Carver of his armour and anything else restricting. Carver could feel his flesh swelling where the venom had spread. He was vaguely aware of Morrigan drawing up another chair nearby and pulling out some light reading so she could watch him suffer at her leisure.

Elissa leaned over Morrigan’s shoulder and furrowed her brows at Carver in diagnosis. “Soldier’s Bane?”

Leliana and Zevran whipped their gazes at Elissa, startled.

Elissa crossed her arms. “Please, I was a teyrn’s daughter.”

Soldier’s Bane was a toxin that Thedas’s nations would inevitably try

to ban in times of war. Any military figure with the responsibility to negotiate its prohibition also knew that it was too effective for a lasting pact to be had.

Leliana wiped Carver's wound clean and applied a bandage. "He's clear for now; Zevran injected the antivenom almost instantly. However, I don't have enough materials to treat the serum sickness disease if Carver contracts it."

Alistair rubbed his eyes and collapsed on the next bed over. "How long does it take for someone to get it?"

"Symptoms can manifest four to ten days from now," Leliana answered, glancing at Morrigan. "We need to prepare to treat his symptoms as soon as possible. Morrigan's healing will help. Ultimately, though, Carver will have to fight the venom's aftereffects and the serum sickness disease on his own."

Zevran cleaned up his tools. "There was a Crow supplier in the market during the day."

"Cesar?" Leliana deduced. "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

Elissa placed a hand on her shoulder. "Focus on monitoring Carver's blood pressure. I'll talk to Cesar tonight."

Alistair's brows jumped up as everyone watched Elissa move for the door. "You can't go alone!"

Zevran rose from his chair. "I'll help you find him."

Elissa nodded as Leliana squeezed Zevran's hand in empathy before letting him go. "Everyone grab some rest where you can," Elissa said, then left with Zevran.

Sten grunted in agreement and departed for the party's other room. Alistair settled in Zevran's former chair to rotate with Leliana through the night and track Carver's health.

Carver blearily blinked up at him. "How...did your sister...?"

Alistair sighed into his hands, debating if he should respond. Eventually, he accepted that Carver was stubbornly staying awake. "Elissa and I found her in the tavern that Oghren and Morrigan were in. Name was Goldanna, a barmaid."

Morrigan snorted at the memory.

Leliana murmured for Carver to take it easy. He spoke slower, nearly slurring. “Didn’t...go...well?”

Alistair’s voice softened. “She just wanted my money. I’m not — you know — I tipped her heavily, and the four of us left. She made it clear she didn’t want to see me unless I had sovereigns.”

Alistair wasn’t a rich man. No one in the party really was.

The former Templar rubbed his eyes again. “Elissa pointed out the truth to me. I’m learning to harden my heart to protect it.”

Leliana sweetly nudged him. “You’re still a good boy at heart, Alistair.”

A squawk answered her. “I’m not Dog!”

“Clearly,” Morrigan muttered from behind her book. “We have a dog and Alistair is still the dumbest one in the party.”

“I see you flipping through pages of herbs,” Alistair accused. “Elissa beat you to diagnosing Carver’s poison!”

Morrigan hurriedly corrected, “Poison must be ingested; you mean venom.”

“You know what I mean!” Alistair defended.

“‘Tis my curse to understand you,” Morrigan drawled. “I’ve studied animals more complex.”

Leliana giggled. “Just admit that Zevran knows his toxins better than any of us. We’re fortunate he had an antivenom ready.”

Morrigan sniffed. “This once, he displayed better survival skills.”

Alistair cheered. “Woohoo, one for one-hundred!”

Morrigan snapped. “‘Tis *Zevran’s* win, not yours!”

The two of them bickered over Carver’s head, their voices gradually washing out to whitenoise. Carver didn’t realise his eyes had slid shut until sleep had completely claimed him.



“...Is this normal?”

“Fevers are one of many symptoms for the serum sickness disease. Carver is probably sleeping to fight it.”

“He’s barely lucid these days....”

Distant voices leaked through Carver’s migraine, barely registering. His head throbbed with a violent resistance against any semblance of sanity. It hurt to wince.

The voices tenderly lowered in volume.

“His body is mistaking the antivenom as a foreign substance. Think a severe allergic reaction.”

“Just severe, then?”

“Oghren....”

“I’ll take over, surfacer. Catch up on sleep.”

“You’ve been taking the most shifts—“

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Humming.

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The scent of paper, then the sound of it ruffling,

Like raven feathers....

A hand brushed Carver's hair out of his closed eyes. For a moment, he knew sweet relief.

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"The woman's name was Rinna. We had been together, the three of us, though Rinna had been my first."

A cleared throat.

"Mine and Taliesen's."

Carver's bedside faintly dipped with drawn circles.

"I never told you the details about Crow training. Near the end, they put us on a rack to prove we can resist pain. I'll call it what it was: torture. I'm proud to have passed. Still, I'm right about Taliesen — his only strength was his loyalty, no martial or strategic skill whatsoever."

"He didn't regret killing Rinna with me. He probably didn't regret trying to kill me, either."

"Like any twisted person, Taliesen was insecure and scared of the world. Half of the Crows are the same."

"You and the others made me different."

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Obnoxiously loud snoring. A heavy weight at Carver's feet twitched

into rapid motion, before its energy tapered off.

A jerk near Carver's elbow. "Ugh, Dog...!"

A snort on his other side. "He dreams of running."

An unintelligible groan. Two more snores eventually joined in.

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"Kadan."

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X

They didn't dream. They had no connection to the Fade.

There were only spaces in their memory,

And a bleary wakefulness.

They didn't know which they preferred. A foolish consideration, given they had no choice. Would they have made the same decisions that had brought them to this state? For Zevran? For the rest of the warden's party?

A foolish consideration, indeed.

Someone else suffered from a bleeding heart.

X

"No way," Elissa refused.

Carver fixed Summer Sword in its sheath. "The archdemon has been

sighted on its way here. You know my mission. Ours.”

Elissa would have none of it. “*All the peoples of Ferelden* are on their way here to fight.”

Carver clicked his teeth. “It’s enough that I missed the Landsmeet. I have to prepare us for the next crisis.”

He had lost three weeks of time due to pain and swelling. There was a mountain of tasks to catch up on.

Elissa frustratedly turned to Satin. “*You* speak sense to him. I have to babysit your noble.”

She stormed off.

Rhiannon frowned from behind her desk. “She shouldn’t be allowed on this floor.”

“Wardens are allowed anywhere in a blight,” Carver corrected. “Besides, she’s still warming up to Arl Nathaniel Howe.”

“An altruistic and level-headed young man,” Satin remarked. “Witty.”

Rhiannon eyed him. “Don’t you dare flirt with a noble. *Sergeant*.”

Satin morosely muttered. “You’ll fit right in with Maric’s Shield.”

Carver moved for the door. “I have to pick up my replacement helmet and make sure Warden Elissa doesn’t bite Arl Nathaniel’s head off. Keep me posted on the alienage.”

Rhiannon and Satin’s replies faded out the door as Carver navigated his way through the army fortress. The restored noble Lady Delilah and her husband Albert had moved to Amaranthine as Nathaniel’s proxy while Nathaniel was helping Denerim prepare for the archdemon under Elissa’s guidance. It had been Anora’s tactic for quelling disgruntlement in court under the thin guise of promoting direct communication between the Grey Wardens and Ferelden’s nobility. Anora had obviously seen something in the man as Carver did, since Nathaniel’s performance was winning over even staunch critics like Fergus and — though she wouldn’t admit it — Elissa.

The blight and events within it had utterly shattered the existing hairline fractures in Ferelden’s political landscape. Just on the subject of provisioning drinking water, the queen especially had difficulty

with three Bannorn lords and four Coastland lords. The Guerrins, Brylands — as in Arl Leonas Bryland — and Oswins — as in Bann Loren Oswin — couldn't come to an agreement given their lakes and rivers also controlled transportation. In the north, the Drydens and Howes controlled mountains from which freshwater flowed, but the rainy season had just passed; meanwhile, the Couslands and Kendells had more access to coastal rather than clean water.

That was just the topic of *water*. If the *queen* was struggling to keep her nobles in line, the situation was unquestionably volatile.

However, Nathaniel's utter *gift* for negotiation was soothing Ferelden's fractures back to health.

Given Nathaniel's unenviable and impossible position, the skill seemed born of survival. Regardless, Ferelden's pulse was leaving the red zone. People in charge were starting to reach agreements and move processes along. Wardens from Soldier's Peak, soldiers from Orzammar, Dalish warriors, and members of the Circle could expect an organised welcome in Denerim and pillows for each of their heads.

While Nathaniel's martial ability had yet to be seen, there was no denying his diplomatic brilliance. He would be a *boon* in peacetime. Carver doubted that Amaranthine would owe post-war reparations for long before it would start prospering in trade across the Waking Seas. In another timeline, Nathaniel's reputation would earn him an impressive, towering statue worthy of Orlais' approval.

Still, Carver had to focus on the immediate future. Loghain and Duncan were on their way north to add portions of the king's army and the Wardens' forces to Denerim's numbers. Nails and the Orlesian warden-commander had the southern line in the meantime, along with Cailan. The king was essentially an honorary commander, too far along in both his sickness and stubbornness to participate as more than a patient. Duncan had advised that the Line would be safer than Denerim based on the archdemon's presence alone. It was also worth noting that Gaspard had apparently returned at one point with Celene's seal of approval, allowing him to lead Orlesian soldiers into the south so long as they ultimately answered to Ferelden and the Grey Wardens.

It meant that Carver had to prepare for Loghain's and Duncan's arrival in the context of his private plans, and under a shorter deadline due to his recent illness. There was also the matter of facing the archdemon with the expected forces while avoiding as many casualties as

possible. Throwing all they had at the fallen god was tempting, but meant nothing without a means to ground the winged nightmare.

Aerial firepower changed the tides of war every time. Carver *could* smite the archdemon and persuade it to attack Denerim in close quarters, but he would need to reach the darn dragon before that could happen.

Considering the behaviour of the warden's party, Carver would have to ask his companions for permission, first.

Carver sighed.

Right. Alternatively, Denerim could just catapult a warden at the archdemon and tear off its wings. Faren would leap at the chance. Elissa would probably wind the catapult back herself.

While Carver's mind raced with overlapping thoughts, he picked up a dragon scale helmet from Wade's Emporium and saw to it that the other drake and dragon armour pieces were delivered to the army fortress rooms occupied by the warden's party. Despite Wade's passionate insistence that simply working with such rare materials was a reward of its own, Wade's husband and Carver firmly agreed that Carver pay them handsomely in accordance with Wade's efforts. Falling utterly broke for what felt like the tenth time of his life, Carver then navigated his way through Denerim to check tasks off his list and ensure that the arling was efficiently anticipating the archdemon's arrival. The day seemed to slip through his fingers quickly when he realised he was going to eat lunch at dinner time.

To Carver's surprise, he found Morrigan alone in a tavern corner. The witch glared at anyone who thought to amicably approach her space, leaving a portion of the tavern eventually ignored.

Carver sat down at her table with a bowl of stew. "Making friends?"

"Do you eat anything heavier?" Morrigan criticised.

Carver glanced at his bowl.

"You pick at your food like a bird." Morrigan sipped her drink. "I would know. Even in Redcliffe, you only took advantage of the arl's soup stock. You should fatten up."

Carver neutrally spooned his meal into his mouth. "I'm not an animal."

“No, you’re my friend,” Morrigan curtly agreed, “which is why you should take better care of yourself. You’re hardly a dense child — or Alistair.”

“Morrigan,” Carver murmured in realisation. He remembered a hand on his brow, easing his migraine with mana. “You used to be averse to touch.”

She sniffed. “So were you.”

Carver refilled his spoon. “Maybe neither of us had been comfortable with anyone until recently.”

“I used to know little of friendships,” Morrigan murmured, “never saw a need for them. I fully expected to be kicked out of the party once my personality was made known, and I won’t apologise for my personality.”

The woman had observed the warden’s party as a raven for a long time. If Carver was to understand correctly, Morrigan had even been watching Elissa and the other wardens since further back, when the wardens had first stepped into the Wilds.

“When I discovered Flemeth’s plans...” Morrigan’s voice drifted. “The four of you didn’t abandon me. You must have fought a terrible battle without hope of real reward — which describes much of our party’s experiences for each other.”

Carver shrugged. “Had you asked Elissa, I’m sure she would have also helped against your mother. Alistair and the others too, with more persuasion.”

“*That* is what I don’t understand.” Morrigan looked at him. “One may imagine all sorts of results from when Flemeth told me to go with the wardens hunting the archdemon. The very last I expected was finding like minded-people with myself, and a friend in you.”

Carver paused. Like-minded people...meaning Faren, Zevran, Sten, and Shale? It was a quick deduction based on how the pragmatists of the party often behaved on the same wavelength. Sometimes they were even as thick as thieves.

Carver hid a small smile. “Morrigan, I really....”

They sat in comfortable silence through Carver’s meal.

Morrigan eventually found her voice. “Carver. I may not always prove...worthy...of your friendship, but I want you to know I will always value it.”

Carver laid his spoon down. “It is I who doesn’t feel worthy, honestly. I admire you and everyone else in our party.” He gently met her gaze. “You’re going to leave after the upcoming battle, aren’t you.”

Morrigan didn’t tear her eyes away. “You knew.”

“Deduced.” Carver’s lips twitched. He bowed his head. “I won’t stop you. With all these forces gathering, the archdemon’s death is certain.”

The price was not.

Still, Carver continued. “The rest of us can handle its army should the horde persist after its death; I’ll make it happen. Faren would be happy to spend a night with you before then. Just...don’t disappear without saying goodbye.”

Morrigan laid a hand on Carver’s own. When Carver looked up, he found Morrigan’s lips trembling like his hand.

Nearly one year felt like a lifetime.

Carver murmured. “We’ll miss you.”

Morrigan exhaled sharply. “If we cross paths again in the future...I won’t pretend I don’t know the lot of you.”

## Chapter End Notes

Yeah. Remember how someone else clenches their hand when they lie?

Fun fact: do **not** try to suck toxins out of a snake bite. I only had Sten do it because I couldn’t resist the idea of the party mistakenly thinking Carver and Sten had shared a “moment.”

I like to frame sad moments with humour. Can you tell? >:D

:(



# Guest

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Carver adjusted the dragon scale helmet hooked to his person as he ignored the glances around him. The Kendells estate was bursting with the fraction of the Kendells legion that had followed Arl Urien out of Ostagar, and now evidently remembered Carver's likeness from the parade. Where Carver had last worn unmarked armour, he now bore the Theirin crest.

Unfortunately, donning a helmet in Urien's presence wasn't an option, not while Carver needed the arl's focus in regards to Denerim's defence against an archdemon. Carver needed to convince Urien to prioritise the construction of trebuchets and ballistas: the former for blunt force to interrupt the archdemon's path of flight, the latter for piercing and hindering the archdemon's movements. Carver also wanted to bring in Gorim Saelac for prototyping designs that could launch nets, if the merchant could be convinced. Of course, none of this would be feasible without ensuring that Denerim's artisans were provided the necessary materials for practice and execution.

So much to do, so little time.

Carver raised his head when a servant finally greeted him at the estate's main foyer. The soldiers standing guard of the estate respectfully stayed out of the servant's path, while the servant himself was an elderly elf in sharp attire.

Hm. The arl's steward?

The servant eyed Carver warily enough, seasoned at politely averting visitors who would waste his lord's time. "May I ask to whom I speak?"

Carver stood at rest. "Please inform Arl Urien that Ser Carver is here."

The servant hesitated. "Carver who—?"

"Let him in, Joslan." A female elf in even finer attire descended from a flight of stairs past the servant. "Arl Urien is expecting him. Oh, no need to escort our guest; I will lead him to the drawing room myself."

The servant nodded once and stepped aside. “As you say, Lady Kallian.”

The woman reached the bottom of the stairs and, together with Carver, watched Joslan retreat to other steward duties. Kallian stood a full head shorter than Carver with a braided bun of russet hair and a coffee-coloured dress that flattered her bright locks. Though modestly decorated, the attire failed to conceal Kallian’s ethereal beauty, casting even her plain grooming into a Victorian painting. Carver could see Kallian as a warm but firm teacher to the elf-blooded heir of Denerim.

He could also see Kallian stabbing her hairpin into a rapist’s eye without changing her statuesque expression.

The reports had erroneously detailed Kallian’s fighting style as “savage.” It was obvious now that shock coloured the accounts, so strange it must have been to witness loveliness perpetrating brutality.

Kallian turned to Carver and gestured. “This way, please.”

Carver offered his arm, and Kallian hesitated with visible surprise before accepting it. As they entered Urien’s drawing room, passing beams of sunlight lit Kallian’s hair aflame.

When Kallian closed the doors behind them, Carver stood by a chair, tentative to take a seat. “I never informed Arl Urien that I would visit him.”

“No,” Kallian agreed, stepping away from the door. “He will eventually learn of your presence from Joslan. More importantly, I have been tasked with passing information to you.”

“Regarding Tevinter slavers,” Carver took a leap, “and others who would prey on Ferelden refugees escaping the blight through the Waking Seas.”

Kallian straightened. “How did you—?”

Carver recalled dock records. “Regardless, Teyrna Oriana’s sentiment is appreciated but unnecessary.” The noblewoman didn’t have to update him on her actions. Carver wouldn’t have approached Oriana in the beginning if he hadn’t trusted her loyalty to Ferelden.

Kallian cleared her throat. “You aren’t upset?”

Carver looked at her. "...Why would I be?"

A pause answered him. "In order to conceal themselves, Teyrna Oriana and her merchant family use a chain of intermediaries to connect with those they hire."

It would bode ill if the Teyrna of Highever was revealed to be utilising contacts outside of Ferelden to control who could dock in Denerim, even for ethical reasons.

Kallian continued. "If orders are traced too far up the chain, the connections of Teyrna Oriana's family have been informed to credit the orders to you, by name."

*What.*

Carver choked. "...Carver?"

Kallian blinked. "Postboy."

*Postboy.*

***Postboy!?***

What was Oriana *thinking*? On one hand, Carver had enabled her in the first place...but *this*?

Carver spluttered. "No matter the cause, a Ferelden noble and a ring of merchants shouldn't falsely attribute their actions to an innocent person. I'm not even rich."

"You truly didn't know?" Kallian realised.

Carver exasperatedly slumped into a chair and rubbed his temples. "Despite popular opinion, I don't actually know *everything*."

Kallian shifted in place. "The cogs are already turning. Still, Teyrna Oriana assures that the question has only been asked a few times. Most privateers are content merely earning good coin. Tevinters or raiders who investigate the root of their troubles aren't graced with an answer at all."

Meaning they were killed.

Carver shoved his face into his hands. *Bloody Antivans.*

"You formerly served Teyrna Oriana as a lady in waiting," Carver

sighed. "As it is now, do you have the means to answer a question of my own?"

Kallian hummed. "I only pass messages."

Carver shot her a look, having used the excuse himself.

Kallian straightened innocently. "What do you wish to know?"

"You mentioned raiders," Carver noted. "I understand your position, so flatten your expression now if you aren't permitted to share this information. I suspect the raiders you refer to are associates of the Felicisima Armada, including a merchant named Castillon. I'd like to know if a ship called the *Siren's Call* lost his potential slaves in transit."

Kallian furrowed her brows. "You wish to know of a *failed* shipment?"

"Are you able to answer me?" Carver pressed.

Kallian pursed her lips contemplatively. "Teyrna Oriana appreciates your discretion and your inclination towards a low profile, despite your many contributions to Ferelden's peace and safety. It is why she respects 'Postboy's' work ethic." She nodded once, having come to a conclusion. "I'll forward your request to her."

"You have access to an information network," Carver began.

Kallian shook her head. "To protect Teyrna Oriana's contacts, the illusion of the Postboy must be maintained. Just as you trusted your letter to Empress Celene with few others, Teyrna Oriana trusts you with few beyond her family and myself. She hasn't forgotten the oath you completed for her."

Carver's brows jumped in surprise. "She told you of it?"

"Not at all," Kallian corrected. "I understand it's an Antivan thing; very sacred. I doubt even her husband knows of it. Regardless, I can see that with the burning of Highever and the fighting at Ostagar, Teyrna Oriana has grown emboldened to protect her family and by extension, Ferelden."

Carver straightened. "I appreciate your enlightenment into events outside of Denerim, Lady Kallian. Your discretion is also noted, considering you follow three different lords. Obligation demands I ask which lord you ultimately serve."

Kallian's entire posture tightened as her eyes narrowed. "Lady Amethyne is my utmost——"

Carver continued. "Save your answer for the real question when it comes, and consider my obligation as mere advice. Better three friends than three masters."

If Carver was reading Denerim's political environment correctly, it was possible for not only Kallian's father or cousin, but Kallian herself to be considered by the city elves for a bann when a new bannorn would be established. While Kallian's connection to Oriana, Urien, and Amethyne was commendable, the woman's near future was going to provide her an opportunity to serve herself.

Kallian's priority was probably Amethyne, to educate and protect the half-elf heir; then Oriana, who connected Celene and Anora and kept slavers out of Denerim; then Urien, whose influence determined city elves' daily lives. Becoming a bann would reduce Kallian's servitude to Oriana and Urien into civil relationships, and give Kallian the means to help city elves directly. If Kallian played things smartly, she would also be able to ensure that Amethyne would continue to be treated well.

Kallian's brows stitched together. "What do you mean—?"

"Ser Carver!"

It was at that moment that Urien burst in, haphazardly running a hand through his hair to check his grooming. The arl hadn't expected Loghain's representative to visit him unannounced.

Carver rose from his chair while Kallian bowed her head and shuffled aside. Behind Urien, a homely-looking girl with bright, round eyes peered at them.

"Arl Urien," Carver greeted. "Lady Amethyne."

Urien started, having missed Amethyne tailing him to the drawing room. The arl gestured for his heir to properly receive their guest, and both grandfather and granddaughter inclined their heads. They wore complementary verdant outfits in reflection of the Kendells crest.

Carver suppressed a twitch of his lips. Cute.

Carver saluted and stood at rest. "Arl Urien, I wish to discuss Denerim's protection against the archdemon with you, particularly

regarding siege weapons.”

Urien processed the proposal while he distractedly motioned for Amethyne to take a seat. The little girl fixed her skirts as she sank into a cushion, head swivelling between the adults in the room and their guest. Children were especially sensitive to moods.

Carver stalled by his own chair. “If you’re uncomfortable—”

“Forgive my distraction, Ser Carver.” Urien shook his head as he finally claimed a chair. Carver and Kallian then followed. “Fort Drakon’s topmost level is fitted with ballistas in the event of a sea invasion, but I hesitate to send my soldiers up a tower. What value have you found in siege weapons against the archdemon?”

The arl had to weigh the value against his soldiers’ fears. The nobles who had left the Line for the Landsmeet had devoted the bulk of their forces to Ostagar, and had only travelled to Denerim with a token guard. Even outside of the Kendells legion, no one was eager to enter a tower in the archdemon’s presence. Carver of all people could reason why.

Urien visibly remembered himself and waved a hand to Amethyne. “Ah — my heir has yet to make her public debut. You are the first guest of mine to see her, so I ask for your understanding.”

Carver quirked his lips at the two of them. “You are attentive to your granddaughter, Arl Urien. No one can fault you for that.”

Amethyne hesitated. “Have I erred somewhere, Grandfather?”

Kallian smirked. “Ordinarily, the arl’s knightly guest would sit after the arl, then you would follow, my lady. As your guard and mentor, I would sit last.”

Urien evidently had a habit of ensuring his heir was comfortable before settling into business or demanding her focus. While the man’s concern with public image motivated him to personally raise Amethyne into a “proper heir,” the end result for Amethyne was still fortunate. To forget himself around Amethyne implied a doting image of Urien.

The arl seemed to realise it and recovered. “Indeed, you have maintained grace, Amethyne. The fault is mine from a place of fondness.”

Amethyne bit her lip to vainly restrain a smile as she quickly glanced between Urien and Kallian. Even the little girl understood that Kallian technically wasn't allowed to correct her employer in front of guests, if not for the circumstances surrounding Kallian's hire. While Amethyne seemed ignorant of courtly ways, she was apparently knowledgeable of the adult world.

Carver had wondered how the girl had handled the whirlwind of changes in her life. He could see he needn't worry too much.

Carver cleared his throat. "As for your question, Arl Urien, I've noted that high dragons are best confronted on even ground. Customised siege weapons should be able to remove the archdemon from the skies. A merchant by the name of Gorim Saelac would also be of help constructing a weapon that can fire nets or bolas."

Urien's lips thinned. "I've read a number of draconology literature by Frederic of Serault. Dragonfire - of any type - relies on a gas that is expended from food broken down in a dragon's stomach and collected in a small sack connected to a dragon's airway. It is still a mystery how the gas is ignited, but the fact is that the low density gas also contributes to a dragon's buoyancy in air. Since the sack's volume is limited, a dragon can be forced to waste its breath and land on the ground to fight with only its claws, teeth, and tail. It has been the way of dragonslaying for years."

Carver awkwardly clasped his hands together. "Dragons can also be enraged to the point of landing, where a blitz attack can finish them off."

Urien's brows furrowed. "That would be placing Denerim's safety in an untested method...."

Carver's gauntlets were suddenly riveting.

Urien choked. "Maker, did you—!?"

"Only mundane dragons," Carver quickly stated, lifting his gaze, "not the archdemon itself, of course."

"Dragons, *plural*?" Urien caught.

Shoot.

Carver stressed, "Please don't tell the Wardens." Elissa and Alistair would react terribly upon learning what a portion of their party had

done for Morrigan.

Urien pinched his nose bridge. "You slayed a couple high dragons while travelling with the Wardens *without* them somehow noticing?"

"Just two high dragons," Carver corrected, "and Wardens Elissa and Alistair had been with me for the first one."

Urien exhaled deeply. "Somehow, I know you're not lying. Well, it is comforting to know that the Wardens here have experience slaying dragons. I'll organise those siege weapons."

Carver stood up, nodding to everyone as he strategically retreated. "... Thank you for having me."

X

Halfway through Denerim's market, a merchant caught Carver's arm.

"Pardon me," the stranger greeted.

Carver scanned the man's face and clothes. "Cesar, I presume. You have my thanks for conducting business past your usual hours."

The Antivan merchant released Carver and folded his hands in front of him. "I do not know what you mean. I simply wish to extend my gratitude for providing myself and my new partner with our recent business opportunities."

"Our...?" Carver echoed.

Past Cesar, a modestly-dressed dwarf walked up to them. His beard was braided in Orzammar fashion.

"Gorim Saelac," the dwarf nodded once, "though you must know that, soldier of Maric's Shield. The knight in charge of Denerim has been passing on designs to me 'for the benefit of Ferelden' with little else explanation. Ser Rhiannon respects you enough to welcome you personally at the west gate and hand you papers."

Carver eyed the two merchants. "Watching the streets, are we?"

"Performing research," Cesar coolly denied.

"Wherever my inspirations come from," Gorim continued, "I'm grateful, if puzzled. I can't tell you how long I've been working in the Merchant's Guild with their connections to Orzammar before I could



finally conclude that no, the smith caste wasn't dastardly planning to invent my ruin. I humbly request your angle."

Carver glanced at Cesar. The neutral merchant was probably just following the money and had little interest in his products' origins. Cesar was simply present to give his inventor, Gorim, support.

Carver looked at Gorim. "You anticipate being fed faulty designs that would ruin your career?"

Gorim held out his hands. "I was a noble caste before my exile to the surface. Orzammar might be targeting me for the same reasons it rejected me. Understand, soldier, I have a child."

Carver dismissed Gorim's exercise in wordsmithing and pointed west. "If you insist, write to a Ruck in Soldier's Peak. He'll send you the reassurance you desire."

Carver extricated himself from the conversation and hastily left the market plaza. Gorim had been Duren's Second before Bhelen had set them both up for exile. If Carver didn't want to explain his thought processes to a veritable stranger ahead of Rhiannon, he just had to convince Gorim to trust him because Duren did.

Speaking of Soldier's Peak...Carver was curious how Brother Genitivi and his apprentice were faring on their return to Denerim with the northern warden forces....

Carver halted in his path, then pivoted for the old warden district. As he drew closer to its heart, more city elves replaced the pedestrians around him, clad in less faded and roughspun clothes than he had last seen them. Carver saw neighbours idly chat as they passed groceries. Children played on the street with invented games. A couple on a bench overlapped their hands, one human and one elf. When Carver asked them for directions to the building where the leaders of Soldier's Peak were staying, the couple was kind and friendly as they responded.

The warden recruits of Soldier's Peak who could fight were camping outside the city walls with the rest of the king's army that had come from Ostagar and Highever, and more forces were still expected with Duncan and Loghain's planned arrival. Just as legion commanders had moved into the city for the Landsmeet, Elissa and Hahren Valendrian had agreed to set up a public building in the old warden district for the leaders of Soldier's Peak. For accessibility, the warden's party still stayed in the army barracks near Carver's personal room.

Carver approached steps that led to the front doors of a towering rookery. People in civilian and merchant wear flowed up and down the steps while a few warden recruits stood guard of the doors. They didn't react to Carver as he passed, confirming his suspicion that he had only been recognised in Soldier's Peak due to his uniform. In Denerim, he was just another Shielder. Past the rookery entrance, Carver respectfully bowed his head to Levi Dryden at the sight of the merchant turned noble.

"Oh!" Levi stammered. "Well met, Maric's Shield. May I help you?"

Carver waved aside Levi's offer. The Coastland noble was busy enough contending with drama between the Couslands, Howes, and Kendells while performing his duties as a landlord over wardens, commoners, and tourists. How flustering it must have been for Levi to attend the Landsmeet as a fellow noble.

"It's nothing, Lord Levi," Carver stated. He preferred not being recognised, anyway. "I'm merely checking on you and the other leaders of Soldier's Peak."

Levi hummed in contemplation, before perking up at a flash of grey past Carver. Administrative rooms occupied the first floor of the rookery, whereas the source of Levi's distraction descended from the second. No doubt residential space took up the upper floor. A separate staircase connected the main floor to the rookery itself, allowing the public to access their mail.

"First Enchanter Wynne," Levi identified.

Crinkled eyes greeted the two men. "I see you, Lord Levi. And Ser Carver, I'm surprised you're without an escort." Wynne joined them at the bottom of the stairs. "Though, I'm less surprised you're up and about. All things are good in moderation, you know."

Carver deadpanned at the address. "Solona and her patients are still in Soldier's Peak."

Wynne chuckled. "You have me there. I suppose we're both too stubborn to lie still. You should know Elissa vented quite heavily to Lord Levi, Faren, Shale, and I upon our arrival here when Elissa found you missing from your bed."

Levi coughed politely.

"I only proceeded as far as the armoury," Carver groaned with red

cheeks. “I had to order the royal legion to help me suit up before I could flee to Ser Rhiannon’s office. Elissa wouldn’t tear into innocent soldiers.”

“That’s an abuse of authority,” Wynne primly stated.

Levi delicately prodded. “You have been unwell lately, ser?”

Wynne responded before Carver could open his mouth. “The knight has recently recovered from Soldier’s Bane.”

Levi looked between the two of them, noting their address of the warden’s party. “You must be the knight from song — Carver the Knight, yes? It’s a pleasure to meet you for such a humble one as myself.”

Right, because there were *four songs* about a Carver.

*Four too many*, in Carver’s opinion.

“Not at all,” Carver hurriedly dismissed. “I would think higher of yourself, Lord Levi. You’re a good landlord.”

Wynne’s lips twitched. “Carver was the deciding voice to reclaim Soldier’s Peak in your name. In a way, he chose you to become its lord.”

Levi spluttered in embarrassment.

Carver shot Wynne a look.

“But I’m just an old woman gabbing away.” Wynne sniffed.

“Warden Faren...” Carver cut off, concluding whom he should ask about Genitivi.

Levi caught on and gestured. “The warden and the golem are around the back speaking with couriers. I understand Warden Faren is a dwarf of note or somesuch, and the giant, Shale, is averse to birds.”

Carver snatched his chance to escape yet another conversation and sought Faren and Shale. Levi bade him farewell while Wynne quickly looped an arm around Carver’s and dragged herself along.

Carver noted her steering. “Faren and Shale should be the other way.”

“We have more important subjects to cover,” Wynne stated. “You

must have noticed that Zevran proposes to everyone with the offer of sleeping together and letting loose. Except you.”

Carver blinked at her. “He did once, but it’s different now. We’re...” Carver’s voice dropped bashfully, “friends.”

Carver’s first real friend — or second, considering Morrigan. Carver felt a little giddy.

Wynne looked at him. “He has great consideration for you, one I would observe as that for the closest thing he has to family, *or*——“

“Don’t even suggest it,” Carver pleaded. He understood Wynne’s intervention. As a voice of reason, she often pulled aside members of the warden’s party to check on them — quite forwardly.

Wynne huffed. ”If you have no such feelings or expectations, I would suggest clearly communicating them with Zevran.”

Carver sighed fondly at the advice. “I appreciate it, Wynne. I can’t imagine hearing this from anyone else.”

Wynne frowned. “No parents of your own? Grandparents?”

Carver shook his head. “None I would feel comfortable speaking about these things with. You’re the first.”

Wynne’s eyes crinkled gently. “Of course, my dear. It’s my pleasure.”

Carver tightened his grip on Wynne’s arm. She hummed encouragingly, sensing his mood. “I would like your advice, or just a listening ear. In the future, if I do encounter someone I wish to have a relationship with....”

Wynne stopped them to place a hand on Carver’s shoulder, and his unknowingly taut muscles loosened. “This is related to your aversion to physical intimacy, isn’t it. I began to see it, after learning of your situation. You casually nudge someone or let them hold your arm only if you feel comfortable with them.”

Carver bit his lip. “I was a woman in my first life. Then I became a boy. Now when I imagine being *intimate* with someone, I — *freeze*.”

“Allow me to ask,” Wynne responded, “if you were in your own male body, would you be able to imagine physical intimacy?”

Carver had spent the last eighteen years as a male. He could imagine

it.

At his nod, Wynne continued, “Your discomfort sources from the idea that the body you’re in belongs to someone else.”

Carver sighed “I *know* it does.”

Wynne nodded. “Then I suggest going to the Fade and speaking with the original Carver.”

It was the obvious yet most difficult answer. Carver found a bench and sat down, Wynne joining him.

“I told Morrigan the other day that I could protect Denerim from the blight and defeat it,” Carver confessed. “The truth is, I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m probably condemning everyone because of my choices. I’ve already hurt ‘Carver’s’ family in ways they can’t imagine.” Carver lowered his head. “I’m not meant to be here.”

Wynne lifted his chin with a gentle hand. “I should have died months ago, and for better or worse, I’m possessed by a spirit. Do you remember the guardian?”

Carver mutely nodded.

Wynne huffed. “To his question, I said that only a fool is completely certain of himself. Still, I am comfortable with who I am, my beliefs, and my situation. Look at me, my dear; should you encounter the original Carver, I pray you don’t become content leaving the world permanently.”

Carver’s lips quivered. No one had told him that they wanted him to live as himself.

Leliana, Zevran, and Wynne had found peace with who they were.

Perhaps it was time that someone else did the same.

Carver and Wynne quietly hugged each other on the side of the street, unnoticed by passers-by. For that moment, they were merely themselves with a friend.

Carver eventually parted from Wynne. “I initially came here to check on Brother Genitivi and his apprentice. I understand they’ve relocated to a corner of the local chantry — or of Wade’s Emporium?” Carver had received conflicting reports.

Wynne tittered. “The scholar and his apprentice have been grounded in the rookery by Elissa. She has determined that details on the Urn of Sacred Ashes should be held until at least *after* the blight to avoid mass hysteria. It’s enough that Sergeant Jory and his ilk are fumbling their way through resolving the issues caused by Haven.”

Carver sighed. “I would be able to do my job better if Elissa didn’t hold information from me.” Or otherwise try to ground *him*.

It was at that moment that Satin materialised by Carver’s side. To her credit, Wynne only blinked rapidly in surprise.

Carver leaned over as Satin whispered into his ear. “Teyrn Loghain, Warden-Commander Duncan, and their forces have arrived. We’ve just received confirmation that the archdemon is expected to hit Denerim by tomorrow at first light.”

## Chapter End Notes

And here Carver was, trying to outfit Denerim with unique siege weapons, among other things. Time to speed up his plans...?

# Kadan

## Chapter Notes

Posting a day early because I was inspired. Enjoy!

The mood at the army barracks was solemn. Even with the bustling of activity beyond the barrack walls, the interior felt as cold and silent as a grave. The warden's party sat facing each other in their shared room. No one was meeting gazes.

Carver leaned against the closed door he had come through with a frown. The atmosphere wasn't good.

Elissa murmured. "How could the archdemon come here so quickly?"

She already knew the answer, of course. Her reports to Duncan and his experience at the Line had helped him arrive to a disheartening conclusion. The darkspawn had finally created enough broodmothers to not only accost Ferelden's forces in the south, but also assist the archdemon with laying waste to the surface. The instant the horde's usual attacking numbers had dropped in Ostagar, Duncan had known that the darkspawn were preparing to hit another target. Insight from the Orlesian Warden-Commander Alisse had then revealed that based on Elissa's report on Orzammar, the archdemon's trajectory pointed to Denerim.

Loghain and Duncan's forces had *barely* left Ostagar in time to arrive at the capital.

Elissa glanced up at Carver. "Did you know?"

Carver turned his eyes away. He had been aware of the darkspawn's conceivable plan since the Clash at Ostagar.

However Elissa read Carver's response, she slumped back against the wall in acceptance. "This is it. If we have any regrets to voice, now is the time."

Zevran chuckled. "At this point, have enough deadly situations not wrung us dry of confessions?"

Oghren revealed, "I saw Morrigan sneaking off to Faren's corner of the rookery last I was there."

Alistair groaned. “*Morrigan* is getting laid before me on a night like this?”

Sten grunted. “The saarebas knows what she wants.”

Leliana watched her fingers lace together and spoke softly. “I am a Chantry sister, Carver, so I’m allowed to hear confessions.”

Heads turned his way — some in knowing, some in interest. At the very least, Leliana could sense that Carver was silently plagued with an internal conflict. The sister was offering him a safe place to speak freely, considering everyone present trusted each other.

Carver crossed his arms, slightly hugging himself while also closing his hands. “There isn’t much to say. I’m a good soldier, but a terrible brother.”

Elissa straightened. “The guardian said that you replaced the life of a babe in its crib and traded worlds that aren’t winning hands. I’m not sure I grasped the poetry.”

Alistair cut in. “Elissa—“

“It’s alright.” Carver sighed. “...I have a twin who is Fade-touched. Growing up with peers who didn’t share her same anxieties, she has confessed to me before that she wished she was ‘normal.’ She never told Father, knowing it would break his heart.”

Alistair gaped in realisation. “...You’re from a family of apostates.”

“Kadan,” Sten exhaled. “No one would have guessed it, looking at you.”

Carver stared at the ground. “Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if Bethany and I had traded places. Then I hate myself for it.”

Bethany was female and well-loved. However, it didn’t mean that someone else would have been the same if they had woken up in Bethany’s place instead of Carver’s. The thought was pointless to even conceive.

There was already a load to unpack behind someone else being a terrible brother.

Alistair shrugged. “Sometimes I wonder what I’d do if I had magic. It



doesn't make me a thief for stealing a mage's chance at normalcy. Besides, you were just thinking about your sister."

Leliana softly stated, "The Maker doesn't make non-mages on a quota."

Carver couldn't pry his jaw loose, fearful he would betray a deeper truth. He watched a crack of sunlight from the barracks' window crawl across the floor like a sundial, counting down the time until night would fall. Then Denerim would have nine hours before the archdemon and its horde would arrive.

"Sten," Elissa suddenly spoke with inspiration. "What were you praying, back when you were in that cage?"

Sten looked at her. "A prayer for the dead."

"Oh." Elissa slumped. "Never mind. I'm not so naïve as to not recognise Denerim's position. I can't promise we'll triumph, nor can I prematurely celebrate our funerals like the Legion of the Dead. I'm not strong enough."

Elissa was playing with two necklaces that usually hung under her armour: the Warden's Oath, and Reflection.

Her voice mellowed. "Tomorrow will be a red dawn for all of us. I suppose I can only most fittingly say...in war, victory."

Alistair intoned, "In peace, vigilance."

"In death," Duncan echoed from the doorway, "sacrifice."

Alistair jumped up from his seat in surprise while Elissa slowly followed. The warden-commander stepped in with a nod to Carver in greeting as the rest of the room turned their heads.

"Well done," Duncan praised the two younger wardens. "You've completed the mission in the spirit of the Order. I have one more assignment to share with you in private before we head out tomorrow. Ser Carver, your commander seeks you as well."

Based on the context, Duncan was referring to the Lieutenant-Commander that was Loghain, seeing as Cailan was in the south.

Carver hesitated. "Teyrn Loghain must wait. I have a matter to attend to."

Half of the party stared at him in shock. Carver's chest was known to beat with a soldier's heart.

Carver passed Dog out the door, deftly petting the mabari. "Spiritual matters. Excuse me."

He strode quickly for his room and barely acknowledged the occasional salute as he passed by. It felt as if the same soldier's heart was lodged in Carver's throat. Even if he retreated to the shadow of a candle and a closed Chant of Light, the parts Carver didn't like about his situation would remain. The shapeless force that had given someone else a second life — a *shared* second life — couldn't give Carver the courage he needed to face those parts if he was rejecting said courage.

Nine hours.

Loghain could wait one.

Carver found himself exhaling into his personal desk and cracking open scrolls alongside tomes. Kallian had forwarded him an update on the *Siren's Call's* status, which sat on top of Satin's report regarding the Hawkes that Carver had been consuming in increments. It meant that Carver had also been borrowing from the Chantry and royal library concerning subjects from the socio-political to the arcane. Mostly by international authors.

The intellectual exercise helped soothe Carver's nerves. It was something he had been doing ever since he'd been a farmer's boy, and now a soldier in a city with resources.

Common was character-based, with each character representing a syllable, and no fixed rule on how to pronounce them except through memorisation. Adding a diacritical mark to the first character for "fi-ll," for example, would "strengthen" it into "pi-ll," but textual context could make them be pronounced as "fee-l" and "pee-l." A diacritic was also necessary for the second character to "soften" it from the default "la" to "ll," unless there was a following word that started with an L sound, in which case the appropriate syllabic character would be used.

No spaces were required in Common, either. This allowed it to be written vertically and still be as fast to read, though it seemed that only the ancient dwarves had taken liberal advantage of this, whereas increased trade with surfacers had gradually fixed Common to a horizontal plane.

In comparison, Orlesian struck closer to home without actually stirring nostalgia, since Carver had only been passingly familiar with French in his past life. Orlesian had a Latinised alphabet due to its Tevinter roots as opposed to Common with its dwarven roots. Orlesian could also only be written left to right, whereas the character-based Common could be written vertically. Ironically, while Orlesian and Common both didn't require spaces, Orlesian actually phonetically linked the consonants between its words, which in Carver's opinion made it make more sense, despite his personal ire at French's usual "logic."

Aside from the pronunciation rules typical of French, the only personal issue Carver could find in it was the fact that the Orlesian alphabet was in all lowercase. Punctuation was too easy to miss while reading it.

Tevene was apparently no better, being in all caps, but Carver at least found it slightly easier to learn how to read. To an extent. He had received an unpleasant surprise when he had once cracked open a tome on "magical theory" and realised that the closest scriptural and lexical relationship he had in all of Thedas were dead people, because modern Tevinters obviously were *not* it. Ancient Tevene was fine — everything from law to medicine was best friends with Latin, after all — and Ancient Tevene was essentially Classical Latin. Words like "ventriculus" retained their definition across worlds.

Modern Tevene, however, was a different animal. It was like New Latin and Middle English's child raised half-way by the cipher known as Elvhen before being sent back home. Carver could recognise *some* words, especially with context. A "magus" was "a person with helpful power," while a "dweomer" was "one who raises dust," or a dwarf. However, the ever-favoured curse "venhedis" — cousin to the celebratory "femundis" — could from Carver's best efforts only be connected to the Elvhen swear, "fenedhis." Guessing at its meaning was beyond the power of deduction, save for the fact that one could assume any elven word prefixed by "fen" referred to a wolf. It was a stretch to seriously consider a claim Carver had once read, where "dhis" meant dick.

It needn't be said that Carver had tried to read Elvhen when he could access it. Tried, and failed. Nevermind he had looked at romanised Elvhen before the written language itself.

Written Elvhen was cursive.

*Cursive.*

Carver felt like he should have been rewarded for putting in as much effort as he had.

Regardless — in short, Carver grasped that Ancient Tevene had been the surface's lingua franca until the schism of the Chantry. Until then, the Anders region had sat in a corner playing with Ancient Dwarven, slowly witnessing their developed language of Common spreading through dwarven trade. By the time the Chantry had split, Thedas had been ready to embrace Common as the new universal language.

That had been more than five-hundred years ago. Not nearly as long as English's universality in Carver's native world, which might explain the lack of colourful accents in Common, but long enough for Carver's grasp of English to be useful. In fact, his curiosity noted that Thedas's greatest difference in accents was merely in Orzammar's American pronunciation and Starkhaven's Scottish, and even then, Starkhaveners were still easy to follow. They were nothing like the Scots of Carver's native world who might as well have been speaking tongues at him.

Phew.

Sten eventually found Carver wrapping his fingers around a quill instead of a sword hilt, contemplating coastal urban infrastructure and methods toward recovery.

"Kadan," Sten murmured as he approached the doorway.

Carver motioned for Sten to enter while sliding his reading material under an especially heavy volume of *The Exalted Marches: An Examination of Chantry Warfare*, by Sister Petrine.

"The Arishok asked, 'what is the blight?'" Sten closed the door gently. "Staring into its eyes, I still have no answer — but perhaps you do."

Carver turned. "Religious and scientific study can only go so far."

Sten shook his head. "You have led us to this point. Thus, you know more than expected."

Carver pondered. "I assume you use the word 'know' differently."

"*Shok ebasit hissra*," Sten recited. "*Meraad astaarit, meraad itwasit, aban aqun. Maraas shokra. Anaan esaam Qun.* Struggle is an illusion. The

tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless. There is nothing to struggle against. Victory is in the Qun.”

“A prayer for the dead,” Carver recognised softly.

Sten nodded. “To understand the world is to understand oneself, and mastery of oneself is mastery over the world. When I was ordered to investigate the blight, I did not expect to find an ashkaari like you.”

Carver’s brows furrowed. “I just found your sword.”

“You have found a great many things,” Sten corrected, “including my soul. You naturally grasp the Qun, ‘what is to be,’ and are ending the blight with such awareness.”

From the lowest peasant’s happiness to the largest battle’s consequences, Carver was driven to right as much of the world as he could according to his unique knowledge. In whatever manner the Qunari and Carver defined “world order,” it appeared that Sten sensed Carver’s similar devotion towards achieving it.

Sten continued. “Yet, you are one person. Your efficiency would be greater should you have those around you obediently fall in line. Howsoever you look at the blight and gain understanding, few others evidently share the ability.”

Carver hummed. “I can’t force the world to listen to me.”

Sten crossed his arms. “That is why invasions are a last resort in the Qun.”

Carver paused, but couldn’t dismiss Sten’s sentiments — not without knowing that one of Thedas’s possible, dire futures would drive anyone to desperate lengths. “I pray I’ll never have to take forceful action. I understand, though. The Qun demands to hope for the best, plan for the worst.”

Sten watched Carver, then curtly exhaled. “You are wasted here.”

Carver’s lips twitched. “Thank you. Sten?”

The qunari grunted.

Carver looked at him properly. “Why ‘kadan?’”

Sten straightened. “I am a soldier, the hands and feet of the greater body. However, the Qun also knows that hands and feet have hearts.

Mine resides in you.”

Carver quieted. “What of your comrades whom you lost to darkspawn?”

“My heart was with them as well,” Sten confirmed.

Carver unwittingly, faintly smiled. Even the Qun possessed romanticism. How could it not when Sten appreciated paintings: masterworks that were the product of diligent skill?

“I’m not sure Common has a fair equivalent,” Carver regretted. “A ‘friend’ can be many things...but a ‘brother’ would stand by your side through adversity.”

Sten huffed. “Your language is polluted with inconsistent meanings. You are not my brother.”

“No,” Carver agreed, “but you are one of mine.”

Carver didn’t specify the others of the warden’s party or mention certain blood relations, and Sten didn’t ask for him to elaborate. The qunari merely stood in the quiet of Carver’s room with deep-set eyes.

Sten finally spoke. “You have brought us all this far, kadan. Do not doubt that.”

X

“Teyrn Loghain.”

“Ser Carver.” Loghain straightened up from a requisition table and motioned in the direction of Ser Rhiannon’s office.

For private conversations, they would customarily meet in Cauthrien’s space. However, paperwork choked the sitting space out of Loghain’s office, and Carver...didn’t use Cauthrien’s office. So Carver led the way to Rhiannon’s currently vacant office where bookshelves formed tight walkways from the door to every corner of the room. Only the path to the desk wasn’t a maze, and the two of them took advantage of it as Loghain leaned against the desk and Carver closed the door behind them.

“Forgive my lateness,” Carver said, but Loghain dismissed it.

“I know how it is.” Loghain crossed his arms and leaned back. “Queen Anora will be leading the king’s army tomorrow morning as

provisional Head-Commander. She, Warden-Commander Duncan, and I will cover battle strategy tonight and finalise it with the legion commanders and senior wardens ere dawn. I would have you present tonight, as I understand Warden-Commander Duncan has called on a Warden-Constable Gordon as his primary aide."

Carver's palm sweated. "Teyrn Loghain...."

"It will be a long night for several of us," Loghain acknowledged. "While I brought a few Shielders with me from Ostagar, you are the Shielder who gathered the peoples of Ferelden and tracked the archdemon with the Wardens. I would value a Shielder's input as my primary aide."

"Teyrn Loghain," Carver solemnly cut off. "I know you poisoned Arl Eamon."

Loghain stilled, then his gaze sharpened, cold and focused. He said nothing.

"I didn't want to suspect you," Carver sighed regretfully. "You're a good commanding officer, a good soldier. I was glad to see that no one in the king's army was sent to Redcliffe on flimsy orders before you left for Ostagar."

Carver summoned the courage to commit to what he had decided long ago.

"It wasn't until I found Foggy and Badger's corpses," Carver continued, "that I realised that Maric's Shield was my blind spot. We're always sent on odd tasks without set destinations, and a member of Maric's Shield would have had the authority to send my scouts back to Lothering claiming that the arlessa and lord were in good health. I only wish there hadn't been people with staunch anti-Orlesian sentiment in the group, that you would have found willing volunteers for your clandestine work. It is...truly a shame."

There was a pregnant pause.

"You don't cut corners," Loghain eventually remarked, voice dropping to quiet seriousness. There was a moment where they stared at each other and stood on the same plane. "You're a farmer's son with unmoving devotion to Ferelden and its king, yet you have an aptitude for the quill, whereas I can only swing a sword. ...It is a shame."

"Is that why you knighted me into Maric's Shield?"

“Perhaps. I promote people for many reasons.”

Carver shifted. He could know everything Loghain could and would have done in this timeline and others, but he’d never know what Loghain was thinking. No matter, Carver had to wrap this up. “Why did you do it?”

Loghain lifted a brow. “You were there when I read Arl Eamon’s letter, Ser Carver.”

Yes, but...fine. Carver would do the heavy lifting in Loghain’s confession. “You wanted the Guerrin legion delayed,” Carver reasoned. “The last thing Ferelden needed while its main military forces were in the Wilds was Arl Eamon welcoming Orlesian chevaliers into the kingdom by the thousands. You ordered Foggy and Badger to discreetly delay the Guerrin legion’s march to Ostagar, so they drugged Arl Eamon into an artificial sleep. For such a delicate task, you would have been better off hiring Antivan Crows.”

“I never intended the arl harm,” Loghain corrected. “A sprained ankle would have been enough to discourage Arl Eamon from commanding his forces south. Ser Guthrie and Ser Brock — or anyone, for that matter — couldn’t have foreseen the arl’s mundane son engaging in blood magic. On that, Redcliffe has my sympathies.”

Carver sighed. “Have you heard enough?”

Loghain blinked.

Elissa and Alistair stepped into view from behind bookshelves.

“...Wardens,” Loghain curtly identified.

Alistair was frowning. “The royal court would never stand for this.”

“And yet,” Elissa curbed his tone, “Ferelden needs every sword hand it can get. As wardens, we must remember to exercise pragmatism where others would not.”

“So we sit on this crime and do nothing?” Alistair gaped. “You can’t honestly say that pragmatism dictates we leave someone willing to *poison nobles* as the commander of the king’s forces!”

“I’m not saying that,” Elissa returned. “It *would* be wise to keep this crime to ourselves until after the blight, but regardless, I’ve made a decision. Teyrn Loghain, when this blight is over, I’m conscripting you



into the Wardens. Until then, know that you are watched so long as you command the king's army."

Carver stared. What?

"What?" Alistair turned.

"Come, Alistair," Elissa's lips quirked, "if Loghain survives the Joining, you'll be his commanding officer."

"Yeah, no thanks," Alistair grimaced, "I don't trust myself with that kind of power. I might order him to dance the Remigold and slap darkspawn in the face with roses."

Loghain looked disturbed.

"If you don't like the idea that much," Elissa assured, "then we could just send him to the Orlesian order."

"What?" Loghain interrupted.

"*That's* what concerns you?" Elissa rose a brow.

"Alright," Alistair allowed. "The look on his face was worth it. Orlesian Grey Wardens it is."

Carver sighed. "Don't I have a say in this? I can't be your watchful eye in the king's army, stuck to Loghain's side like a burr. That would raise questions, for one."

"With everything I know you capable of, I'm sure you'll find a way," Elissa reasoned.

"I'm not eager to attract the queen's displeasure."

"As I said," Elissa smirked. "You'll figure out how to balance your many *machinations*."

Carver hesitantly coughed, unable to find a response to that.

"You'll attend tonight's meeting," Elissa turned to Loghain. "Prepare Ferelden's powers-that-be for your transfer after the battle against the archdemon. I'll prepare Duncan. Carver, will you attend?"

Carver shook his head, eager to catch sleep before dawn. "I'm not  
\_\_\_\_"

“He will,” Loghain stated unexpectedly confidently. Everyone blinked at him. “Following his acceptance of my invitation, I was going to elevate his responsibilities. This is a chance as any for Ser Carver and I to prepare Ser Nigel for the position of Lieutenant-Commander.”

Carver’s throat closed in shock. His voice crawled out of it. “I can’t be Captain. Ser Cauthrien had served for far longer before taking the position — many others have served longer than I’ve been here——“

“You chose Ser Nigel to be my captain,” Loghain remarked. “The least you can do is support him through another promotion.”

Carver inwardly huffed at Loghain guilt-tripping him because of a situation the teyrn had caused. Loghain was wonderfully righteous *and* illogical like that.

Elissa approved. “The queen can’t criticise a soldier for sticking close to his commander even in private conversations between father and daughter. Not when the commander expects to resign and the soldier will be promoted accordingly.”

Carver interceded. “At the very least, I will keep a door between myself and Teyrn Loghain.”

“But within hearing distance,” Alistair noted. “Congratulations on the promotion, I guess.”

Carver stressed, “I haven’t accepted *anything*——“

“That would be the bell before the meeting time,” Loghain said as a gong-like impact resonated throughout Denerim. The local chantry maintained a bell tower, and a cleric would track hours with a candle clock to know when to ring the tower’s bell. The cleric’s last shift was always the last bell in daylight.

Night had fallen.

The four of them departed from Rhiannon’s office and strode for their destinations. Carver followed Loghain to the royal war room while Elissa moved to catch Duncan. Alistair tailed after Loghain and Carver until they reached the meeting location and greeted Anora. It was indeed strange times; the one wedded to royal blood on the throne traditionally only had influence over the royal legion, as it were, during peacetime. Now, all noble powers under the crown — the true king’s army — were ready to mobilise under Anora’s command.

Alistair caught Carver after the formalities with a whisper. “You’re lucky Elissa and I noticed the message you slipped into Dog’s collar.”

Carver glanced at Alistair, noting a stiffness to his jaw that outlived the night’s revelations. Loghain had contributed to the suffering of those Alistair had grown up around, including his guardian Arl Eamon. It didn’t explain Alistair’s twitchiness.

Carver politely excused himself from Anora’s presence and stepped out of the war room, closing the door behind himself and Alistair. “You wish to talk.”

A heated whisper answered him. “You knew Redcliffe would happen, yet you remained silent! Your actions speak for themselves!”

Carver pulled Alistair aside from directly facing the door and sternly lowered his voice. “A king doesn’t send his army before his scouts. If the two soldiers I sent had returned with news of undead stalking Redcliffe, the army would have readily answered. But if I had sent the army to Redcliffe on the mere claim of undead, not only would I have been suspect, but the army would have been justified in rejecting my orders and instead arresting and questioning me. No matter how certain I could have been, no reasonable army would act on a claim without evidence.”

Alistair shook off Carver’s grip. “The possibility of them going to Redcliffe wouldn’t have been zero.”

“It would have been greater by sending scouts ahead,” Carver stated. “Regardless, this debate is moot.”

Alistair clenched his jaw. “I would have sacrificed everything I had to save Arl Eamon.”

“So you would have,” Carver agreed. “You would have had only Arl Eamon to worry about.” He watched Alistair pace in front of the door, one round, two rounds. “What’s wrong, Alistair?”

The fire in Alistair visibly sputtered. “Duncan’s going to kill himself.”

Ah.

Alistair halted before him with wet eyes. “You knew? Of course you did. Tell me you have a way out of this — *please*. When I imagine Duncan or Elissa sacrificing themselves to slay the archdemon, my throat swells with grief.”

Carver hesitated. "...Faren can kill the archdemon without dying."

Alistair's brows shot up. "How?"

"I honestly don't know," Carver replied. "You'll have to ask Morrigan the details. *After* her night with Faren."

"After—?" Alistair held his face in his hands. "Zevran's going to laugh at me. Sex really *can* save the world."

Alistair and Carver shared a sigh in unison.

Alistair lowered his hands. "Will we all survive tomorrow? Can you deduce that?"

Carver noted Duncan and Elissa's approach and moved to open the door. "If I can convince the queen, blackmail her father, and bribe the commanding warden of Ferelden with his own survival that our main strategy should be throwing one crazy dwarf at an archdemon, then we stand a pretty good chance. Greetings, Warden-Commander."

Duncan stopped before them. "Ser Carver, I understand you'll be joining us tonight. I have also called on Warden-Constable Gordon to accompany us."

Carver watched Elissa stroll to a stop behind Duncan. "Will the Warden-Constable be assisting you with Joinings after tomorrow's battle?"

Duncan knowingly led the way into the war room. "Not all of them. Us wardens don't have to share everything between ourselves, and it isn't our place to meddle in politics."

Carver's eyes briefly met Loghain's as they entered. "I appreciate it."

Anora elegantly snorted from her side of the war table. "Warden-Constable Gordon is already busy enough recruiting from Orlais' numbers. The few Orlesian soldiers here in Denerim are under his care."

At that moment, a man with a voluminous beard hurried into the room, Elissa and Alistair closing the door behind him. "What can I say? Only a few showed promise." He noticed Carver. "Pardon me, it seems I've missed introductions. Gordon Blackwall, Warden-Constable of the Orlesian Order."

Carver froze.

Loghain gestured. "Carver Hawke of Lothering, knight of Maric's Shield. Following my enlistment into the Grey Wardens, Ser Carver will be captain of Ferelden's standing army."

For the first time, Anora's composure cracked. "*What?*"

"*Temporarily,*" Carver hastily negotiated.

Duncan clapped his hands. "Well, it seems we have a long night ahead of us. Shall we?"

# Protector

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dawn broke on a contrastingly beautiful day. The weather was clear, a coastal breeze cooled Denerim, and not a single bird shattered the peace.

No, not even one.

The few Ash Warriors present shifted restlessly in place, sensitive to their dogs' silent focus. No audible wildlife usually meant an incoming storm sent by the Maker himself – or something worse. Given the cloudless sky and the blanket of armour standing at attention across Denerim, no living creature aboveground had doubts on what calamity was fast approaching:

The archdemon and its horde.

Carver glanced on either side of himself, then to the horizon towards Denerim's landmarks. Given the warden's party had developed marginal relations with Ferelden's foreign allies, Carver had contributed to battle strategy by positioning certain party members to lead separate legions.

Leliana secured Fort Drakon with Clan Siona, as Denerim's civilians had been moved to the fort's underground levels for the battle. Even should the fort be flattened, the people would be safe. Wynne guarded Denerim's west gate with the Circle's forces. Oghren held the north gate with the Legion of the Dead. The king's army and *all* of its legions — including the Cousland, Howe, and Kendells legions — were stationed outside of Denerim's walls. The Grey Wardens under Duncan formed concentric rings from the vanguard of the king's army, all the way inwards to the centre of Denerim.

Among the wardens was an Orlesian captain named Thom Rainier, who was assigned to Gordon's side in the outermost circle. Either Gordon was impressed by Thom's ability, or Thom was eager to impress him. Carver still felt like he should have seen that one coming. Outside of Ferelden, it was common practice to refer to people by their surnames if any, rather than their first names. He should have asked for Gordon's full name on first mention.

Regardless, the plan was to hold off the horde from invading Denerim, while baiting the archdemon into Fort Drakon's sights. At the top of the tower were Elissa and Alistair, where they would direct Fort Drakon's ballistas to ground the archdemon into an open area of the city.

It had been a choice between the docks and the market square. Given both battlefields could threaten Denerim's economy, but only one would require warriors to know how to swim, Ferelden's forces had been ordered to aim for downing the archdemon in the market square.

There, Faren and Shale awaited to finish off the archdemon.

Carver stood responsible for watching Faren and Shale's backs. It was entirely possible that a smaller army of darkspawn would concurrently dig their way into Denerim from below, and with a significant warden presence in the city, the darkspawn had a beacon. To prevent communication from breaking down at infrastructural choke points, Carver and his party had to be able to quickly lend support to Leliana, Wynne, Oghren, and the Wardens while still prioritising Faren and Shale's immediate safety. For that reason, Carver called on Sten, Zevran, and Morrigan to help him.

Elissa also kindly assigned Dog to the party.

Loghain assigned a squadron of Shielders and soldiers from the royal legion.

Zevran chuckled next to Carver. "I did not expect that when I went out to seek death, I would instead find a friend. Now, for a true friend like you, I would gladly storm the Dark City itself. Do not doubt it."

Carver groaned, though his lips twitched upwards. "Please, Zev, not now. I was just starting to psyche myself up."

Sten eyed them. "You two shared close words last night as well?"

Morrigan snorted.

"*Just* words," Carver sternly stated. "For what it's worth, I've privately spoken with each of you."

Satin snickered from behind. "That's our captain."

"Shields up!" Carver suddenly roared.

**—BOOM.**

In one stroke, lightning split Drakon River and two of its four bridges, nearly culling the southern half of Denerim from the northern half. The blast threw most of Carver and his party off their feet, while those who managed to hunker down in time left a scar in the cobblestoned street where they had stood.

Everyone picked themselves up, only for riverwater and dirt to lash their faces and press down on their shoulders. Carver stumbled but was caught by Dog.

“Archdemon!” Carver shouted.

Dog darted ahead and caught a soldier by her arm before she could drown in the river. The soldier cried out in pain and shock, but recognised the help and painfully crawled up-bank for solid ground. Carver whipped his head around to check on his squadron as a leathery flap of wings could be heard but not seen.

Morrigan hurried to him, her skin laced with shallow cuts. “What’s wrong?”

“The bridges,” Carver panted, then raised his voice. “Secure the bridges!”

Morrigan ran after him as Sten, Zevran, and Dog hastily followed. The soldiers were running the other direction as ordered. “The bridges are gone, Carver!”

“They’re down,” Carver corrected, hurrying to the closest ring of wardens he could recall. “Darkspawn can’t swim, but they can cross unstable paths without fear. Wardens, darkspawn ahead!”

**SHRIIEEEEK—**

The archdemon’s gargantuan body suddenly swept low over everyone’s heads, sucking the air and sunlight out from between buildings. The river curled up with a clap.

**—TWANG.**

Just in time for a massive bolt to strike the waters, clipping the archdemon. The dragon pitched up into a building with outstretched claws and vaulted at a steep angle, cleanly dodging a second bolt.



—TWANG.

The rising sun returned blindingly, capturing the building's collapse into the river. Above the din, Carver could hear feral darkspawn sprouting from the ground.

"It's creating more paths for the darkspawn!" Morrigan cried out.

Sten growled. "And heading for the wardens!"

Of course, because Fort Drakon watched the sea — *and* the river.

"No matter what," Carver grit his teeth, "we need it to land in the market square—!"

Zevran suddenly burst into laughter. That was when another roar could be heard above the chaos, quickly rising and distinctly dwarven. Carver, his party, and a line of wardens gaped in an arc as Shale stomped *through* a building into view and swung her arm straight at the tower, to which Faren somersaulted in full armour.

"No friggin' way," a warden gawked.

The archdemon deftly dipped a wing to sweep up and towards the tower, sharply dodging yet another bolt, only for Faren to smack into its back like a fly. The dragon hastily flapped its wings, gaining altitude and blocking everyone's view of Faren's fate while it screeched.

—TWANG-G-G-G.

A volley of bolts suddenly flew at it from Fort Drakon, all shedding blood and three piercing scaled armour. Elissa and Alistair had lured the dragon into a pattern, only to trip it up in the last minute.

KRAAAAH!

Carver drew his sword just in time to save his neck as darkspawn descended from all sides. He couldn't track the aerial battle anymore, focused now on the heat of close combat. Sten split an ogre's chest open and Zevran blinded three genlocks with his swords while the archdemon shook the sky with furious cries. An emissary threw a sheet of ice across a street, only for a giant spider to leap at it and tear the spindly darkspawn in half.

Morrigan shifted back into human form, whipping out her staff to trip

Zevran's genlocks from behind.

Zevran stared as she spontaneously combusted the genlocks. "Anyone else have an astonishing side to them hidden? How about you?" He narrowed his eyes down at Dog.

"Move, elf," Morrigan muttered with a toss of lightning past him.

**—SHRIIEEEEK—**

**BOOM!**

The ground shook as a wave of dust suddenly slammed over the battlefield. Carver spun around a darkspawn's attack and beheaded it as he glanced at Morrigan's flames. The impact had come from the east. A glance aside confirmed his suspicions when he caught Duncan splitting off from the battle for Denerim's docks.

*Maker, no!*

Carver panted and vaulted over the ogre's corpse. He surgically slashed aside a hurlock in his path. Nothing was going according to plan. While the silhouette of Fort Drakon could still be seen standing, the faint trail of dragon leather fluttering through the air told Carver enough. Faren must have shredded the archdemon's wings with his weapons and sent the dragon crashing into the docks – as for how Faren could have landed, Carver didn't know. Hopefully safely.

"Secure the docks!" Carver shouted as he ran after Duncan, anticipating someone would hear him.

The last thing he needed were darkspawn ambushing a battle against the archdemon. Carver cut through an unaddressed horde of darkspawn he could hear gathering up after him, fortunate enough to have Duncan's bloody trail to track. The warden could sense exactly where the archdemon had crashed.

**SHRIIEEEEK!**

The cry rattled Carver's skull in his head, invoking a wince that did little against the sudden spray of seawater into his helmet.

A body suddenly slammed into Carver, throwing him into an upturned stone.

"Urk—!"

“Ser Carver,” Duncan recognised as he unsteadily slid off of him, then tripped. “Ack.”

Carver bleakly refocused, then widened his eyes. “*Down!*”

Carver yanked Duncan with him into a combat roll before a massive claw tore into the stones behind them. Armour and sand cut into Carver’s skin as he scrambled to his feet and pulled Duncan with him into a consecutive dive without waiting for a screech. Another quarter of the docks exploded with sudden force.

Carver shook the dirt out of his eyes only to look up into the jagged snout of a fallen god.

For a split-second, it launched at Carver and gave him a clear view of its inner throat.

—Then a qunari sword lodged itself into its eye.

“*Rah!*” Duncan cried out as he leapt at the archdemon.

Carver whipped his head around to see Sten charging in with Zevran, Wynne, wardens, soldiers, Circle mages, and Templars. The lattermost hunkered down to strengthen their area cleansing around the archdemon, leashing its breath while the rest of the forces defended the battlefield from darkspawn or leapt in headfirst with Duncan.

Carver shakily stood up and sheathed Summer Sword lest he end up cutting himself. The Templars *were* stealing the archdemon of its breath, but only while they could be protected. The archdemon had been grounded in what Anora, Loghain, and Duncan had agreed was the *worst* battlefield: the rocky shores of the now shattered docks.

Even afar, Carver could perceive Oghren and the Legion of the Dead readily facing waves of darkspawn, so long as they didn’t have to take one step closer to the ocean. The chaos at the docks also threw a mist everywhere, obstructing Fort Drakon’s sight from a clear shot. Shale, Leliana, Clan Siona, and the wardens and soldiers who weren’t near the archdemon were definitely swamped with protecting Elissa, Alistair, and Denerim’s citizens from being overrun.

That was when Carver noticed a spark flicker up the archdemon’s throat.

Even leashed, it was still an ancient god in the form of a dragon. Carver didn’t often swear, but,

Shit.

“Everyone out of the water!” Carver roared as he threw off his helmet and dove into the frey.

Though only a heartbeat passed, Carver felt himself resurface with a shock of cold down his lungs as he willed all he had into his hand and spotted the first sign of scaled flesh. He punched the archdemon in the throat with a smite. *Hard*.

**ROAAAAAR!**

A branch of lightning struck the docks and skittered across the water, zapping all thought out of Carver. He and the Templars had more than halved the archdemon’s damage, but exhaustion was now clutching them by the neck, whereas the fallen god was still warming up. It had only saved its breath to maintain buoyancy in the air and dodge the ballistas’ bolts.

Now, all its enemies were in front of it or at its feet, drowning.

**SHRRRRRIIEEEE——**

Carver desperately climbed onto one of the archdemon’s thrashing limbs to gasp for air, stabbing Summer Sword into the limb as he did so.

Maker, no more lightning – *please!*

That was when something blotted out the sun.

Was that—?

**CRASH!**

Fort Drakon’s tower *smashed* onto the archdemon, utterly flattening it into the docks. Elissa and Alistair crawled out of it with drawn swords.

Elissa roared. “*Vengeance, baby!*”

Alistair pointed. “*Now, Faren!*”

Carver spluttered despite a grin splitting across his face. Those crazy wardens. They had barely missed dropping the tower on *him*.

“From the very start,” Carver shouted as he tore Summer Sword out of the archdemon, “I wondered if you two would be the death of me!”

The archdemon shrieked as Carver severed its leg, right in time for Faren to leap out of the tower and into the dragon's open jaw. The archdemon flailed in alarm with arcs of lightning once, twice—

**THUMP.**

Then fell dead, destroying the last of the dock. Everyone watched with bated breath as its jaw twitched, before suddenly cracking open into a full maw. Faren stood with a mace shoved up the mouth's roof, his other mace slimy with blood, tissue, and shards of bone. Faren had literally beaten a god to death.

The docks erupted into cheers.

*"We did it!"*

*"All hail the Wardens!"*

*"The Blight is ended!"*

Elissa, Alistair, Faren, and Carver slowly made their way to solid ground as the retreating cries of darkspawn could be heard, vanishing back underground or under a warrior's blade. Morrigan crawled out of the tower and joined them at the docks, exhausted but smug, evidently having assisted the tower's controlled collapse. Carver retrieved Asala and handed it to Sten while the crowd bumped into him with praises and joy. Many were crying. More were grinning.

The warden's party eventually found each other.

"It's over," Elissa panted, a smile splitting her face in half.

"Yes," Carver spoke roughly, gazing down at Summer Sword. "It is."

X

The damage Denerim had suffered was more than matched by the bulk of Ferelden's forces present. That was how after progressive recovery of the city, everyone who could be convinced into a festive mood was sucked into one, from the Dalish to the dwarves. Even Carver was forcibly dragged from his desk into nice attire, and then the royal ballroom.

There would be a formal event for the king's return to Denerim for his Joining, but for now the royal palace and the city's streets came to life with shared revelry. There were a lot of celebrations in Ferelden's

future.

Carver gazed out a shuttered window, vainly trying to decipher if Clan Siona, the city elves, and Denerim's low-income district were truly dancing in circles around the vhenadahl together.

Leliana nudged him. "Stop working."

Carver glanced at her. "I'm not at my desk."

"You have a dagger," Leliana deadpanned, "hidden in your clothing."

"Summer Sword wouldn't fit," Carver admitted.

The vast ballroom swelled with music, and Carver shot Leliana a look. He recognised this tune — and its three cousins.

The bard snatched Carver's wrist and pulled him to the floor before he could open his mouth. A crowd of other dancers pressed in around them, trapping Carver between two ways to embarrass himself.

Carver hissed. "You wrote those songs, didn't you?"

Leliana jerked him into a forward lock with an innocent smile. "Be happy, Carver. The public hasn't yet realised that these analogies refer to the same——"

Carver pulled them into a reverse pivot.

Leliana giggled. "I'm glad you'd prefer to dance."

When the music blessedly turned to a waltz, Carver finally retreated from the floor and headed for the charcuterie and sweet tables, mentally exhausted from keeping up with the steps. He slipped a plate of cake to Sten at the end of one table.

Sten quickly accepted the dessert, swapping out his plate of cookies. "They said they had cake. I had nearly taken it for a lie."

Carver stole a spot beside him with a grab for water, only for Zevran to beat him to it with an outstretched goblet.

Carver accepted the wine to gulp, then sip it, aware they were in the royal palace. He cocked a brow at Zevran. "Posing as a servant?"

The assassin smirked, sipping his own drink. "Maybe I'm also trying to loosen you up, Carv. You must relax."

"I know my strengths," Carver muttered into his cup.

Past the ballroom's open doors, the Legion of the Dead could be seen stiffly idling like statues, obviously eager to return to the Deep Roads. The devoted group of warriors then coalesced around Faren, Oghren, and Shale with a spike of albeit still solemn energy. Regardless, they were worth monitoring. Carver had been in a tavern of dwarves before. Oghren pulled out a wineskin large enough to carry a baby, which — well, wasn't surprising. Then Wynne strolled over.

Zevran caught Carver's arm.

"I'm just going to look," Carver defended.

"Don't," Elissa walked over with a grin, "it will be funny."

Carver gaped, affronted. "You didn't like it when *I* drank."

"*You* could've died from alcohol poisoning," Elissa returned. "Wynne is apparently built from tougher stuff. Besides, you're obviously avoiding a chance for the queen to promote you into a captain in front of everyone."

The ballroom doors roared with new energy. The dwarves were climbing on top of each other to make a pyramid, them and everyone around them chanting. *Everyone*. Let it not be said that Fereldens couldn't enjoy a good display of strength.

Carver clicked his tongue. Alright, *this* was starting to spiral out of control.

"Where's Morrigan?" Elissa suddenly asked.

A distracted hum answered her. "Wherever the bird flies," Carver muttered.

Zevran prodded Elissa. "Where's Alistair?"

Elissa fluttered a hand. "With Duncan, Arl Eamon, and the rest. He's finally realising how much of a hypocrite he can be, saying *I* should outlive him. Duncan's sacrificial attitude is putting things into perspective."

Sten swallowed a bite of cake. "You're punishing Alistair."

Elissa lifted her chin. "Maybe."

A gaggle of nobles drifted over to the ballroom doors, inflating the crowd. Everyone present was a soldier at some level given that a lord's army fell under a bann's army, which fell under an arl's army, which fell under a teyrn's army, until finally, the king's army. Even Levi could be seen in an alcove chatting with Nathaniel and other quieter participants of the celebration, though a cheer coloured their faces. Loghain was in the back of the ballroom with Anora and a string of grey-haired nobles whom Carver recognised as old supporters of the royal family. Carver mostly left them be. Loghain was Duncan's responsibility, now.

The gaggle of nobles approached Faren, their question clear in tone and body language. The rogue replied in a louder dimension for both.

"We wouldn't be here without the surfer!" He pointed.

A servant slipped through the crowd for an alcove, his entire posture hurried. Nathaniel turned his head as the servant whispered, before the young arl briefly nodded to his company and gracefully spun away. He set his goblet on a windowsill as he headed for a veranda.

The gaggle of nobles passed Nathaniel, where he seemingly vanished from thin air.

"We have come to cheer the saviour of Ferelden!" the nobles declared.

Carver placed his goblet on a windowsill, committing his own breach of etiquette as Elissa jovially nudged him. "Carver, they want to know who saved them!"

Carver distractedly gestured to her. "Warden Elissa is a true hero."

Elissa's squawk was swallowed by the roar of celebration that erupted as Carver paced for the veranda, swiftly dodging nobles who gathered to praise the warden. He ran into the veranda's banister, whipping his head about, before catching sight of Nathaniel weaving through the crowded streets afar, his orange doublet and titian half-cape marking him out. Carver hauled himself onto the banister and leapt down an entire story, rolling up to his feet and making chase.

Though Carver had grown taller than the average man, only his forehead benefitted, and he now struggled to track Nathaniel's shrinking head through the sea of merchants, commoners, and their raised cups while essentially darting about on his tiptoes. Still, he knew these streets as a soldier of the king's army, and he pivoted down an alley for the city stables. After several wild minutes of



hoping he hadn't completely lost Nathaniel, Carver finally broke free of the crowd,

—Into the path of a screeching horse.

“*Woah!*” its rider reared the steed, then trotted back to shift in his saddle.

Carver fell back on his butt, catching himself with his hands. “Sorry! I’m sorry!”

The horse turned its head with a tug of reins, revealing Nathaniel behind them. “Watch where you’re going—! Wait, do I know you?”

Carver scrambled up to his feet, motioning for the stable hand to quickly bring him a horse. “I’m Ser Carver of the king’s army, and I must follow you to Amaranthine!”

Nathaniel scoffed as he kicked his horse forward, not waiting for Carver to mount his. Nathaniel’s horse began to pick up speed. “I have urgent business in Vigil’s Keep — the crown can punish me later!”

Carver hurriedly kicked his horse to race after him. “I’m here to *protect* you!”

“From what?” Nathaniel shouted back through the wind that whipped past them. “Politics?”

“Darkspawn!” Carver galloped astride of Nathaniel. “You received word from the Grey Wardens, didn’t you?”

“A Warden Solona,” Nathaniel reluctantly revealed, face taut with worry. “Apparently, self-aware darkspawn attacked my home shortly after the time I know the archdemon died. Warden Solona drove them out and has taken one of her recruits down a chasm in the Knotwood Hills for the Deep Roads.”

“Solona...?” Carver echoed.

Duncan had been busy helping repair Denerim and prepare recruits for the Joining, seeing as Denerim could ill afford more dead bodies so soon in the likely event not all recruits survived. For Solona to write to Nathaniel over Duncan, she must have prioritised notifying the less busy Nathaniel that his sister, brother-in-law, and unborn niece or nephew were safe. Another raven was likely on its way to the rookery in the old warden district with a scroll addressed to Duncan.

*If* Solona had found the time, between clearing out Vigil's Keep and chasing after evidence of self-aware darkspawn.

"Knotwood Hills..." Carver repeated in horror. "There are broodmothers below it! Arl Nathaniel, we must ride there!"

Nathaniel spluttered after Carver as the soldier sped up. "Aren't I in charge!?"

Carver shouted back. "I'll protect you!"

Nathaniel hurried his horse. "What's a broodmother!?"

## Chapter End Notes

Nathaniel is so confused. Around Carver, that's pretty normal, he he.

One more crisis, then on to Kirkwall! >:D

Edit: I just learned that Leandra says Carver is 18, not 20 by the time of DA2. Events in this fic are occurring about a year ahead of canon, but some lines don't land when the subject is 17. I've thus gone back and replaced Carver's current age with 18. Let's pretend Carver has been 18 for more than a year now.... Woops.

# Force

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nathaniel nocked an arrow to his bow, a nicked wooden thing that had been hastily packed onto the arl's horse. In comparison, Carver had taken a random military mount, arming himself with rations and the dagger he had hidden in his formal attire. They were far from fully armoured or armed, but Nathaniel's half-cape fortunately provided him a semblance of protection against arrows, despite its more fashion-inclined purpose.

At the very least, they were entering the Deep Roads looking good.

Nathaniel stealthed past dwarven puzzles with a low voice. "How do we know the darkspawn came from here?"

Carver quietly depressed a plate that revealed another hidden entrance. "We can trust in Warden Solona."

A bloody trail of darkspawn marked Solona and her party's descent down Knotwood Hills' chasm, then deeper still where only lava lit the Deep Roads. Nathaniel had been alarmed to see that lyrium veins began to also light their path. Knotwood Hills was an inhospitable place overgrown with gnarled trees and prone to sinkholes, yet a lyrium mining operation was evident the farther underground they went. None of the tools looked dwarven.

They stepped over a hunched, bloated corpse as pink as a baby leaking black blood. Nathaniel's face scrunched in disgust. "I don't recognise these kinds of darkspawn."

Childer hatchlings.

"They apparently also eat other darkspawn," Carver commented as they passed a scene of dead hurlocks and hatchlings.

Nathaniel flinched at apparitions of dwarves and darkspawn battling. "I've only ever heard of ghosts."

The battle of Kal'Hirol, fought by casteless dwarves abandoned in the First Blight.

“This thaig must be as old as it is haunted,” Carver noted.

Nathaniel threw a look back at him. “Would you stop that?”

Carver halted behind him with a whisper. “Stop what?”

“Making everything creepier,” Nathaniel remarked, then motioned ahead. “You lead. You overreached with your dagger against those bandits earlier, anyway.”

Carver huffed as he swapped positions with the arl. “I’m fixing it.”

“And I’m helping,” Nathaniel murmured as they snuck down a mining gangway. Hopefully it would be a shortcut. “For whatever reach you lack, I’ll make up. Just trust me.”

They froze when rapid footsteps echoed around a corner ahead of them, louder, until finally Carver snatched something and held a dagger up to it, while Nathaniel drew back his arrow.

“*Not the face!*” Carver’s victim yelped.

Nathaniel lowered his bow in shock. “What is a human doing down here?”

The man in Carver’s grip peered past his eyes squeezed shut in fear, before slowly lowering his raised hands. “Y-You’re not darkspawn? Oh, thank the Maker!”

Carver tilted the dagger at his neck. “Answer the question.”

Hands were thrown up again. “I-I was just scavenging for treasure! Honest!”

Nathaniel stepped up to Carver’s side, brows furrowed with analysis. “Darkspawn don’t possess the reason to capture humans – or let them live. Why did you think we were those monsters?”

“I don’t pretend to understand them,” the stranger defended. “They caught me, then a warden freed me from their cage. There’s nothing more I can say!”

“Are you tainted?” Nathaniel questioned.

The man suddenly spat in Carver’s eyes and bolted.

Carver disgustedly wiped his face with his finery while Nathaniel

loosed a single arrow at the scavenger's calf. The stranger crashed into the ground as Carver regained his sight and glanced over. The man had fled as far as ten metres. In the flickering lava and lyrium light of the Deep Roads where the man's dirty figure was nearly an illusion, Nathaniel had made an impressive shot.

"Okay," Carver gaped.

Nathaniel turned, moving them forward. "If Warden Solona let him free, then he's not tainted. The darkspawn aren't interested in killing him, either – though we should let the man reflect on his past life choices."

Carver caught the arl as he stumbled. "There's a lot of raw lyrium here."

Nathaniel grimaced as they rounded the corner. "I'll be happy to rid of these sapient darkspawn and return home to my sister."

Carver's own head throbbed, except both him and Nathaniel knocked into each other. The tremors continued past their collision – followed by a flash of heat and light down the hallway. The earth shook again.

Nathaniel gripped Carver tightly. "An earthquake? No, something smaller. A controlled collapse?"

Before earning his title, Nathaniel had travelled the Free Marches with his mother's cousin whenever the elderly man had deigned to leave Starkhaven. Nathaniel possessed a subtle worldliness unique to someone broadcasting that they were nothing but Ferelden despite his neutrality towards other countries. Herding Ferelden's scattered nobles into basic agreements required an *awareness* of self-image, when one had squired under an Orlesian chevalier for the last seven years and one's father had committed blackest treason in the past year. At least Nathaniel's paternal grandfather had been a Grey Warden long ago, for the short time Padric Howe had lasted before expiring with his Joining.

The hallway ahead of them roared.

"Or a golem," Carver suggested.

The two of them raced down the hallway for the chamber at the end of it, only for Carver to throw out an arm and catch Nathaniel from falling forward into a pit of *broodmothers*. A tentacle shot out, and Carver severed it with a whip of his dagger as he and Nathaniel

stumbled back. A body slammed into them from the side.

“Maker!” Nathaniel cried out in alarm.

The other person yelped, spinning around with one hand on a flaming staff and the other hugging a kitten peeking out from under his collar.

On the other side of the pit, a giant spider leapt aside of a lava golem’s smash, tumbling into the wall as a woman. She picked herself up with a crooked staff. “*Anders, focus!*”

The mage near Carver and Nathaniel whirled around with a toss of fire at the golem. “I was answering the door! Someone wants a cup of sugar!”

A dwarf with full-face tattoos hacked at a hurlock emissary with two swords. “Do you only know how to make *fireballs*? That thing’s an *inferno* golem!”

“No appreciation,” Anders muttered as he redirected his focus to a crate of lyrium from the ceiling.

Carver smacked Nathaniel’s arm as he sprinted for the emissary, throwing his voice across the chamber. “Solona! The crates!”

He didn’t wait to see if his cousin heard him, tackling straight into the emissary with arms opened wide. The two of them hit the ground, teeth bared and arms twisting, before the emissary kneed Carver in the ribs and scrambled aside for his fallen staff. Carver rolled over with a control rod in his hand and smashed it against the ground.

“No!” the emissary howled just as the dwarven rogue stabbed both swords through the darkspawn’s back. The rogue kicked him free of her swords into the broodmother pit.

At the same time, the inferno golem keeled over in mid-punch and the ceiling blew up with sudden fire. The crate of lyrium lurched – just as an arrow struck its swinging pulley.

**BOOM!**

Carver threw the dwarf down as a tonne of raw lyrium dropped on the pit of broodmothers and exploded, seemingly twisting reality itself before exhaling a cloud of sparkling dust. Carver awkwardly rose to his feet, helping the rogue up with him. A scan around the chamber confirmed that everyone else was wobbly but otherwise fine. It could

have also been his bleary vision.

The dwarven rogue sighed. “My platoon can rest, knowing these darkspawn are definitely dead.”

Across the pit, Solona unsteadily stood up. “Sigrun, for regularly facing these monsters, I *must* have you join the Wardens. You aren’t returning to the deep to be unmourned and forgotten.”

Sigrun shifted. “But my vow....”

Solona straightened, tossing her braid over her shoulder. Her hands were shaking. “The correct answer is, ‘I’d love to.’”

Aside, Anders picked himself up from beside Nathaniel. “Would you two stop flirting for *one moment*?”

X

“This is...larger than a local anomaly,” Nathaniel remarked.

The group of five were headed east along the North Road for Vigil’s Keep, carrying critical news for the Wardens and the arling whom the darkspawn were accosting. By Solona, Anders, and Sigrun’s accounts, the darkspawn in Knotwood Hills had been fighting each other. Not unexpected given their violent nature, however these darkspawn were both capable of speech and defending two distinct factions. With the archdemon’s loss, the prospect of darkspawn achieving independent, organised leadership troubled those who acknowledged the facts.

Denerim was still fresh with celebration over the blight’s supposed end.

Vigil’s Keep additionally lacked a full retinue of wardens. When Elissa had summoned the forces from Soldier’s Keep to Denerim, Solona had stayed behind with mage children, mage elderly, former werewolves who hadn’t learned how to fight as humans yet, and Solona’s patients, including Ruck and his guardian Duren. The few able-bodied recruits among them had followed Solona to Vigil’s Keep upon notice of the keep’s distress and defended the stronghold. To stealthily scout the darkspawn, Solona had then brought minimal strength — i.e. Anders — with her to Knotwood Hills.

Amaranthine and the Wardens were undermanned and operating blind. They needed information on their enemy and the numbers to act on it.

Solona at least grasped this intuitively. After clearing out darkspawn from Vigil's Keep, she had sent ravens to Nathaniel and Duncan, and had singled out a more recent yet battle-tested recruit by the name of Kristoff. A married man who had sworn himself to Solona's command after defending Vigil's Keep, Kristoff hailed from a humble family who dutifully volunteered a recruit to the Wardens every generation. By Solona's order, Kristoff and a former werewolf by the name of Swift had cut ahead of her and Anders to a remote village in the Blackmarsh. The locals there had apparently claimed they had spotted darkspawn in the marshes' abandoned town, though the village was known to be a superstitious lot.

"A darkspawn civil war," Sigrun added to Nathaniel's consternation. "Wars usually end with a victor, don't they?"

Carver nodded from where he walked beside the two. The party had split Nathaniel's and Carver's horses between pairs of Nathaniel and Sigrun, and Solona and Anders. Carver and Solona had silently agreed that Carver would rather walk than risk Solona losing track of the wandering Anders. The blonde mage was still sulking from where he sat hugging Solona's back as she steered their horse.

"The darkspawn had captured a scavenger," Carver pointed out, "possibly to prevent the man from spreading word of their lyrium mining. While not all darkspawn must be averse to harming humans, the idea had developed into their main platform *somehow*."

"Meaning they have a leader," Solona concluded, "or they are otherwise capable of reaching a consensus."

"Chilling," Nathaniel murmured. "If the locals in the Blackmarsh spoke true, then the darkspawn in the marshes aren't attacking humans, either. If villagers can see darkspawn, the darkspawn must be able to see them."

The gates of Vigil's Keep rose in the distance. Solona lifted her chin. "I need to support Kristoff and Swift in their investigation."

Subdued orange hues brightened up Vigil's Keep as painted vases or gilded pillars in baroque fashion. A commonplace sight was an artistic bear crouched on all fours upon a shield split four ways, displaying sectioned patterns of hearts and daggers. This heraldry vigilantly watched the keep's walls and entrances as wall carvings, and hung as banners within the keep, revealing the bear to be brown and the shield to be orange and white. Even the keep's wind vane was an iron



bear on all fours, and corbels supported the keep with carved bear visages.

As the party rode unobstructed through the gates and dismounted from their horses, Sigrun and Anders peeked at Nathaniel's doublet, perfectly matching the heraldry's sedona orange. Enamelled on the buckle of Nathaniel's half-cape and embroidered around the hems of his clothing were walking bears, occasionally accompanied by a shield split in four. Bear paw prints as fine as spider silk patterned the inside of Nathaniel's clothing. Guards bowed as the group passed.

Nathaniel noticed Sigrun and Anders' looks. "My father enjoyed refashioning the keep in our family's image, as much he did spending my mother's money to do so."

Anders' gaze slid away. "Not judging."

"You're a noble," Sigrun noted, "yet the people here don't spit at the sight of you."

Nathaniel responded drily. "Thank you, I think."

"Nathaniel," a man in sedona hurriedly welcomed them through the keep's main doors, "Warden Solona. Your return gladdens our hearts."

"Albert." Nathaniel clasped the man's forearm with one hand and patted him on the back with the other. "Where is Delilah?"

It was common practice for the warden — by the traditional meaning — of the keep to greet lordly guests.

The merchant husband of Delilah shook his head. "The stress of recent events has grounded her to bed. Along with her diabetes, the local Chantry sister fears Delilah might give birth...prematurely."

Nathaniel's lips pursed. "Delilah was a premature baby herself. Maker knows my sister will be fine. Come, I must review Amaranthine's security."

The soldiers and wardens of Vigil's Keep found Carver a longbow, quiver of arrows, and chainmail while Nathaniel and Solona checked on the states of Delilah and the arling. Apparently, supplies were scarce even in the keep. A wagon-friendly route known as the Pilgrim's Path connected Amaranthine's ports with Denerim's, earning it the reputation of being Amaranthine's economic lifeline. However, trade caravans had recently begun suffering ambushes on the path.

Steel, even a knightly sword, was laborious to find and maintain, and Carver preferred the forces at Vigil's Keep to keep the blades they had. Carver was knighted; he could draw a bow.

In the meantime, Carver recalled locations of ore and lyrium deposits and noted them to the local quartermaster. Amaranthine could start benefiting from its own resources while trade proved difficult. By the time Nathaniel and Solona returned from their critical tasks, Carver had managed to also prepare four horses.

"The Pilgrim's Path cuts through the Wending Wood," Nathaniel emphasised to Solona, reaching for his horse. "I don't want to believe bandits would risk that overgrown forest, but the fact remains that merchants are suffering. In turn, so are we."

Solona hauled herself up over a saddle, revealing she had altered her mage dress into a side-slitted surcoat and stuffed her chainmail underneath. The warden now wore breeches tucked into boots. "We agreed earlier that Kristoff and Swift require back-up. Their investigation of our enemy is crucial."

Anders groaned as Solona snatched him up to sit behind her. "Where are we headed?"

"The Wending Wood," Nathaniel replied as Solona simultaneously said, "The Blackmarsh."

The two leaders looked at each other.

"Had I the resources," Nathaniel spoke, "I would send parties to both locations at the same time. However, the only forces I'm willing to spare from my arling's security are the five of us."

With help, Sigrun climbed onto a horse behind Solona. "I go where she goes."

Carver mounted the last horse. "I go where Arl Nathaniel goes."

"And Anders is stuck with me," Solona concluded. "To the Blackmarsh."

X

An increasingly denser, saltier fog tracked the party's proximity to the remote wetlands of the Blackmarsh. Carver's grip around his reins tightened. With remarkably low luck, entry into the Fade awaited him

there. The thought frightened him, but he owed the original Carver to not shy away from the “opportunity.” No one noticed his anxiety, given everyone was riding ahead of him. The fog also hid a more important reality from the rest of the party.

The Blackmarsh was riddled with rifts that, ironically, were burdened by the very power that had created them.

During the Orlesian occupation of Ferelden, an Orlesian minor noble by the name of Marcilla had stolen into the Blackmarsh and slain the local high dragon accosting the area. The secret blood mage had sought power to maintain her youthful appearance through the dragon’s blood, and it had worked, for a time. However, the dragon had indeed been ancient and, with its generational impression on the locals, immortal in spirit. When Marcilla had later been appointed as the local baroness du Marais Noir, she had divided the dragon’s bones across the marsh and used blood magic to ban the dragon’s spirit to the Fade. Marcilla had also abused her power to steal the blood of the barony’s daughters and continue fuelling her youth.

When the barony had eventually rebelled, Marcilla had sundered the Veil and sucked everyone’s souls into the Fade. By her own error, the baroness had by then morphed into the perfect slave for Pride, a demon who had simultaneously pulled Marcilla’s soul into the Fade and merged with her. So long as the perpetrator remained on the other side of the Veil, the Blackmarsh’s rifts were inert.

The events had all been decades ago, early in Orlais’ occupation of Ferelden. The Blackmarsh had been haunted for *years*.

Carver sighed deeply and caught up with Solona near the rear. “There are other capable mage recruits, Solona. Why insist on bringing Anders?”

Solona spoke flatly. “My direct supervision is the only thing keeping him from running away at the first opportunity.”

Carver glanced back at Anders. “He’s still trying?”

The blonde mage woefully waved a hand. “Not until I find freedom.”

“I can’t tell you how many times Faren, Leliana, or I have caught him fleeing,” Solona remarked. “He views the Joining as a philanderer does wedding vows.”

“Except I might die in a Joining,” Anders deadpanned.

An eerie howl split the air. Clouds rolled overhead.

“You might die at any time,” Sigrun commented.

“Darkspawn?” Solona halted her horse, the party following suit when they noticed it. “*Howling?*”

Nathaniel readied a bow and arrow. “No – blighted wolves!”

The young arl’s cape fluttered as his arrow lanced a distant shadow in the fog. A canine squeal hit the earth as the fog broke forth and darted for the party. Solona hastily drew a flaming staff before Carver threw a hand out.

“We can’t set our only path on fire!” Carver warned.

Nathaniel steadied his horse and loosed a rain of arrows ahead. A row of blighted wolves fell before the party, another row tripping over the bodies. Carver quickly nocked two arrows and fired them with Nathaniel’s barrage. The earth under the tainted pack suddenly collapsed like a sinkhole, closing up over the wolves’ limbs. Sigrun finished them off with thrown daggers.

The party dismounted as Solona evened out the earth with a gesture. “I sense more of the taint farther in. Maker, Kristoff and Swift *must* be alright.”

Everyone hurried after Solona as she ran ahead. Carver called out. “There might be darkspawn mixed with the tainted wolves. Be careful!”

A clash of steel and snarling neared them. The fog parted to reveal two humans wrestling with blighted wolves, straining to keep the beasts’ tainted fangs and claws away from bare flesh. Arrows, daggers, and a flash of fire quickly downed the wolves.

The men on the ground panted. “Warden Solona!”

The party helped the two up, identified as Kristoff and Swift.

“How were the wolves tainted?” Solona demanded.

Kristoff caught his breath. “—You must leave! The darkspawn, he spoke — plans to ambush the wardens who would come searching here! We’ve been made bait!”

Solona patted Kristoff and Swift’s shoulders, pushing them. “Share one

horse between yourselves and ride for Vigil's Keep. No warden leaves for an investigation without my permission!"

Swift stumbled. "Warden—"

Carver urged him. "Go."

Kristoff and Swift dashed for the horses and vanished into the fog with echoing hoofbeats.

Sigrun blinked hard through the fog. "Now the darkspawn are planning ambushes?"

Everyone readied their weapons.

Nathaniel murmured to Carver. "I fear for the Pilgrim's Path. Your urgency now makes sense. This crisis should have been solved — yesterday."

Dense shadows melted through the fog around them; first a pack of childer hatchlings, then a circle of adult children, then finally a hurlock emissary. Like the one the party had encountered in the mines, it carried a staff. Carver's jaw clenched at the sight; normal darkspawn emissaries were only capable of blight magic, which relied on the taint and was completely independent of the Fade. Such magic was what allowed Warden Urtha to perform her blood experiments for the Architect despite being a dwarf. Yet, Carver had now seen two examples of darkspawn capable of accessing the Fade.

Which meant that darkspawn had souls.

At least, the two mentioned.

If this was possible after making darkspawn drink warden blood in similar fashion to the Joining, what did that say about the taint? What were its true effects on all it touched, from inanimate to animate, mundane to godly? To an extent, the reverse-Joining had essentially allowed the two previously-soulless emissaries to develop their own personalities, like a certain spirit of Compassion would be able to in another timeline.

The emissary was talking.

"The Mother does want the wardens out of the way." The darkspawn summoned a sphere of shadows into his hand, before suddenly, unnaturally seizing. "Into the Fade you shall b-be — what is this!

Mother has t-tricked me? No! I will burn you — all of you! Mother most of all ...!”

Carver’s calmness stuttered out of him in faster and shorter breaths. He didn’t want to acknowledge the facts, but his body was choosing that moment to suffer it: hyperventilation.

“*Mother...!*” the emissary howled.

The sphere of shadows blew up into a gaping hole that swallowed everyone. Reality twisted. Carver’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he fainted.

## Chapter End Notes

Since heraldries are very pixelated in Origins, I added plausible embellishments to the existing [Howe heraldry](#). Specifically, I added white hearts to the orange squares of the heraldry’s shield, and orange daggers to the white squares.

In the [flag](#) attributed to the gentleman pirate, Captain Stede Bonnet, a heart and dagger means life and death. That’s what is coming when you see his flag. Since the Howe family is one of Ferelden’s oldest, and has lasted on the border of the pirate-ridden Waking Sea, it’s easy to believe they speak the language of their neighbours.

Yup, the party is all rogues and mages! When I played Awakening for the first time, I made my mages throw fireballs ahead of us. My rogues would then prey on the Panicked enemies who were knocked down and being dealt damage over time. It’s not sadism, it’s smarts!

I also had a *tiny* crush on Nathaniel in my first playthrough. Of course, I’ve been fond of most all male characters, but Nathaniel’s voice especially tickles me pink to this day.

**Spoiler alert:** We won’t see the original Carver just yet!

# Pest

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Carver,” Solona whispered.

A boat hung overhead, drifting along an axis independent of gravity. When Carver slowly sat up, other mundane ornaments faded in and out of view. Nothing in the Fade lasted beyond the thought sustaining it. Including the terror gripping Carver’s heart.

“Easy.” Solona helped him sit up, then rise to his feet. “The emissary pulled our minds into the Fade. The others are scouting ahead for traps. We don’t know where in the Fade the emissary drew us to, though it seems he likely knows less than we do.”

A sunlit cityscape sprawled around them, stone and wooden structures rising where only foundations remained in the real world’s Blackmarsh. Particularly strong thoughts were sustaining the environment – thoughts from the Blackmarsh’s townsfolk and baroness who yet lived in the Fade. Carver minutely trembled as he put one foot ahead of the other. Solona walked beside him, pretending not to notice.

No matter how Carver felt about the Fade, it couldn’t compare to what Solona must have felt in Knotwood Hills.

“Are you alright?” Carver murmured.

Solona knowingly glanced at him with steel blue eyes. “For the mission and those under me, I am.”

Carver could relate. “You don’t have to be strong for anyone.”

Like a puppet without strings, Solona slumped against Carver’s side, resting her head on his shoulder as they walked. She drooped — before abruptly straightening up and palming Carver’s rib. “Where’s Summer Sword?”

Carver released a chuff at the reminder. “I came here straight from the celebration in the capital.”

Solona nudged him. “You didn’t have to do that.”

"I was worried about you," Carver firmly defended. He wrapped an arm around Solona and slowly pressed her against his shoulder. She grudgingly loosened up. "Besides, the sword deserves a break after relieving the archdemon of a leg."

"Really?"

"Really."

Solona's lips twitched upwards, her countenance glowing at the violent imagery. The thought of murder evidently soothed her. When they saw where Nathaniel, Sigrun, and Anders awaited, the two cousins slowly parted.

Solona muttered to his shoulder. "The Fade terrifies you."

Carver bit his lip, conscious of their company and of Solona's situation. "Technically...I shouldn't be alive."

They caught up with the rest of the party, where Anders heard Carver's aside. "Does the chatty knight have dramatic gossip to share?"

Solona looked at Carver with slightly wide, glittering eyes.

Sigrun turned to Anders. "I haven't known Ser Carver to talk much."

Anders pivoted off with a sarcastic gesture. "You should have seen him when we took Soldier's Peak."

Everyone hurriedly walked after Anders before they could lose sight of the slippery mage. Solona shot one final look at Carver before taking the lead. The Spirit Warrior was a rare yet known specialisation for fighters who weren't born Fade-touched. Through deep wisdom and natural attunement, these warriors were bolstered by spirits who augmented mortal abilities in exchange for a glimpse of the physical world. Naturally, the Chantry's Templars rarely acknowledged that distinction.

It helped that few outside the Circle bothered to brave the substantial Fade studies required to comprehend spirit warrior abilities. A small number of dwarves in history had specialised in the field, and none had lived in the same era of each other. Accidental acquisition of similar abilities were in fact more common. Case in point, Fenris with his lyrium tattoos; Seekers, who could briefly call on spirits to perform the Seeker-making process that reversed Tranquility; and finally, the



guardian in Haven, who was an incomprehensible miracle on his own.

The way of the Spirit Warrior was a high-cost, low-reward specialisation. In another timeline, it would even die off completely after certain events in Kirkwall. If blood mages could draw a demon into a Templar, there was a fear that they could likewise abuse spirit warriors.

Regardless, Solona understood what it meant to be sustained past one's natural lifespan. Although what Solona knew of spirit warriors and of Wynne's situation didn't accurately define Carver's circumstances, the mage warden perfectly misunderstood Carver. At the very least, Solona was quietly pleased sharing something with her cousin.

Carver was a lying coward. He was also tormented and relieved that given the "part" of the Fade they were in, the original Carver couldn't be there. Not when the original Carver shouldn't know about the Blackmarsh, much less be able to imagine it pre-Rebellion days.

The path ahead suddenly exploded with fire.

Everyone whipped their gazes to Anders.

"Demons!" he pointed in defence.

The flames abated to reveal a ring of desire demons around a rift. The demons turned their voluptuous bodies towards the party – and hissed with a row of fangs so wide, their faces split in half.

"By the Stone!" Sigrun yelled.

Solona shapeshifted into a spider and tore at them, instantly killing all of them. Nathaniel and Carver nocked arrows pointed at their surroundings while Solona shifted back and peered at the rift, then at the pedestal below it. The warden swayed, holding a hand up to her mouth in nausea. Whatever the demons had created, the pedestal had obviously helped them keep the rifts open.

With a gesture, Solona encased the pedestal in rock and shattered it. The rift jerkily twisted, unfurled, then vanished with a burst of light. Everyone nearly fainted at the sudden weight upon their minds.

Anders and Nathaniel held on to each other. "For this many demons to exist here," Anders remarked, "there must be more. Demons tend to congregate where opportunities to enter the living world arise."

Solona pointed her chin at a distant, boldly-coloured roof marking the centre of town. “Let’s stick together and sweep the area. We should eventually find if not minds, then spirits further in.”

The party trusted the mages who had passed their Harrowings, and fell in line. With every rift and ring of demons they cleared, the sensation of watching eyes grew stronger. When the flashy roof grew into more than a square patch of colour, a man in front of a barred gate stopped them.

“Wanderers?” the man squinted at them. “I can’t remember when we last had visitors. You best not be demons!”

Solona held up a hand at the man’s grip of his sword. “You be a folk of the Blackmarsh?”

“I am he,” the man warily replied, loosening his grip. “Have you come for the town? That bloody baroness is imprisoning us here so long as we cry injustice at her misdeeds.”

“Baroness?” Nathaniel echoed. “Ferelden hasn’t been home to such ranks since the Orlesian occupation. You guard a changed town, friend.”

The stranger’s lips pursed before he stepped aside, clanking the gate open. “We evidently share confusion. Seek the bounds of the baroness’ property; there you will find the townsfolk and the spirit of Justice that has come to help us.”

X

After crossing several streets, the party learned that the townsfolk *had* gathered...into a *mob*.

“Another of the Orlesian’s dogs!?”

“Drive them off!”

“Begone, foul spirits!”

Nathaniel ducked as Carver caught a thrown brick their way. A fistful of mud clipped his hair and splattered on Anders’ mage dress.

“We’re not Orlesian!” Solona rebuked as she cast shields over the party. “Or demons!”

Sigrun stood in the centre of the party, nonplussed by the rioting of

taller people. “Those two are comparable?”

“Halt, good people!” A tall suit of armour similar to the gatekeeper’s stepped in, bellowing. Though the figure inside couldn’t be seen, their every word naturally boomed out of their armour. “While I cannot speak for the mortal’s company, she exudes a benevolence worthy of spirits.” The stranger softened their voice, nearly melting Carver’s fear away when he heard it. “What calls you here, good mortal?”

Solona straightened. “My companions and I were pulled into the Fade by a darkspawn mage. We seek to undo his wickedness and return to the waking world.”

“Then you also suffer from injustice,” the armoured stranger spoke. “A spirit of Pride has trapped the people of the Blackmarsh in the Fade. Pride follows the will of a baroness who once stole and slaughtered the people’s daughters. Join us, as we gather to force Pride’s walls down and demand she makes amends!”

Anders scoffed. “What’s in it for us?”

Solona shot him a look before addressing the outspoken stranger. “You do not play on one’s insecurities as demons do. I would have your name, spirit.”

The figure shook their head. “I have none – only a virtue to which I aspire.”

“Justice,” Solona recognised. “Should my companions and I help you bring peace to the townsfolk, will all of you likewise assist us with our troubles?”

The mob and the spirit of Justice glanced at each other, then at the subtle griffon texture of Solona’s leather armour. A hesitant consensus resounded, led foremost by Justice.

“Very well, then.” Solona gestured, and the party formed up behind her.

Justice and the mob surged against the baroness’s property gates, before the wood moaned and finally splintered. Justice barrelled through, knocking down demons crowding the baroness’s courtyard. Carver quickly bolted after Justice to pull them back by the shoulder.

A woman sauntered out of the property’s mansion and into the courtyard. “Well well, if it isn’t a swarm of insects—”

**BOOM!**

Justice and Carver flew back into the ground as Solona levelled the mansion – and Pride with it.

Mostly.

Pride twitched up out of the scorched earth, spitting ash. “*Kill them all!*”

Carver rose back-to-back with Justice as the crowd of demons fell upon them. “Solona! Watch out for the emissary!”

Carver rapidly fired arrows from his bow while Justice cut down a mass of hostility behind him. The spirit hollered back. “I don’t suppose your enemy was a tall, filthy creature?”

A quick turn confirmed that the top half of the emissary’s torso was bleeding on the ground, dead.

“Maker’s breath,” Carver muttered.

The hurlock emissary had indeed sought Pride out for power, and had ended up in the crossfire of her mistakes. At least Anders was having fun with the rest of the party and the mob. The blonde was yelling “Never taunt a mage!” and “Suck on a fireball!” while he set demons on fire.

At that moment, Pride hissed at Nathaniel’s clothing. “A Howe has come to claim land lost to him? Ha! Pathetic Ferelden—!”

A bear immediately jumped the demon, claws flying.

Solona had shapeshifted into the Howe heraldry. Carver realised too late that he was with loose glass cannons.

“You are in good company!” Justice remarked at the sight.

Well. Let it not be said that justice didn’t belong in a battlefield.

Pride snarled under Solona’s claws and an accurate volley of Nathaniel’s arrows. Carver realised too late what the demon’s raised hand meant before reality abruptly fissured and exploded with eye-watering brightness. It seemed an elephant suddenly collapsed on Carver’s mind as he grit his teeth through a migraine—

And unconsciousness.

The burden remained as he slowly opened his eyes. Carver twitched a finger, only to realise that the weight was his own body.

“Why would demons wish to enter the mortal world?” a basso voice rumbled Carver’s own thoughts.

Carver sat up and turned, only to come face to face with an orange tabby kitten.

Yellow eyes twitched down a pink nose, then aside to observe a striped tail. “This form is...disgusting.”

Anders gasped, falling to his knees. “Nooooo, Ser Pounce-a-lot!”

Carver belatedly realised the fight was still occurring around them, as Solona, Nathaniel, and Sigrun tag-teamed a towering, scaled giant with horns and a whip of lightning. Pride cackled in glee at having entered the real world around them. Anders morosely scooped up his kitten without a care of lightning bolts narrowly missing his head.

Carver launched himself at Anders, diving aside of a crackling whip.

“Anders! Priorities!” Carver hissed.

Anders chuffed at loose blonde strands while Justice squirmed in his grip, yowling. “Unhand me, mortal! There is justice to deliver!”

“Ser Pounce...!” Anders moaned.

Useless. Carver grabbed at his back, only to pull away a bow snapped in half. He had just become useless as well.

“Carver!” Solona shifted back and yelled.

Carver drew his dagger and leapt into the battle. “Coming!”

A mana-draining strike at Pride’s wrist startled the whip out of existence, earning Carver a kick to the stomach. He stumbled back into Sigrun like a bowling ball, and they hit the ground hard.

“*Insolent pests!*” Pride roared,

—Before an arrow pierced its eye.

*THUD.*

Nathaniel already had another arrow nocked as Pride fell. “You need

to work on your reach, Ser Carver.”

Solona punched Pride down with a stone fist. Then blasted the demon with a ray of fire that melted the very earth beneath it into lava, for good measure. Everyone only caught their breath when the demon dissipated.

The party regrouped around Anders, who stood up mournfully hugging a possessed tabby to his chest.

Justice glared balefully at the pool of lava. “For what it is worth, I thank you, mortals. I have fulfilled my vow. May the victims of Pride’s madness rest in peace, wherever they have gone to now.”

“Why?” Anders wailed. “How could that demon cross over with her own body, while you had to possess my cat!”

Carver sighed. “When Pride sundered the veil, everyone was pulled back to the waking world into our own bodies. The townsfolk of the Blackmarsh have long been skeletons; they have, as Justice says, ‘passed’ away.”

Solona nodded. “Meanwhile, Pride and that baroness’ wills had merged long ago, so they had grown powerful enough to exist independently. Justice shares none of that history or desire.”

Anders frowned at them. “That doesn’t explain why Ser Pounce-a-lot had to go.”

Carver knew of one instance where a demon could possess a cat, befriend an innocent girl, and declare, “*Amalia loves only me now. I am her friend while you are just a stranger.*” Carver shivered. Honnleath had fallen to darkspawn by the time he and Elissa’s party had reached it, so Amalia and her entire family had been slaughtered before Kitten could bewitch anyone. On the bright side, at least a demonic kitten wasn’t preying on little girls?

Carver coughed. “Maybe animals are different?”

“We have no time to waste,” Nathaniel huffed, trudging back to the distance where they had left their horses. “If the darkspawn are capable of cunning, then everyone in Amaranthine is at risk, including the warden recruits. The walls around Vigil’s Keep and Amaranthine City can contain many of my citizens, but they won’t hold forever against an organised darkspawn horde. The only ones we can rely on neutralising this crisis beyond such walls are the people standing with

me right now.”

Solona determinedly agreed, drawing everyone else to follow her and Nathaniel. Sigrun caught up with Solona to curiously ask about the Fade, while Carver warily walked behind Anders at the back of the group. Anders and Justice were quietly arguing.

“To enslave another creature does not seem just,” Justice remarked.

Anders spluttered. “Ser Pounce was my *pet!*”

Justice rumbled in displeasure.

“It meant we were friends who lived together,” Anders sulked. “You know, I’ve never had a real family, but I learned long ago that I can just choose one for myself. There was this mouser in the Circle called Mr. Wiggins. I’d feed him a little, and he would let me pet him whenever I wanted.”

Justice’s feline eyes narrowed. “That is servitude.”

“You’re impossible!” Anders stuffed Justice down his robes until only the kitten’s face peaked out of his collar.

Anders glanced up at Solona and Sigrun chatting from afar, confirming they hadn’t heard his row with a cat. The blonde suddenly glanced aside to where Carver followed, belatedly realising the soldier had been there for the length of it.

Anders grumbled. “Meanwhile, I’m stuck with my boss being flirty with you and Sigrun.”

Carver spluttered. “*Flirty?*”

Anders caught Carver’s expression and shrugged. “So you don’t swing that way. Doesn’t mean Solona hasn’t been smiling more recently. Or, rather, twitching her lips upwards. I bet if she smiled, she would be a hundred times prettier.”

Carver shook his head vigorously in correction and disgust. He and Solona were *family!* Leliana was his *friend!* Honestly, Anders...!

“She really can attract anyone,” Anders continued, gesturing to the air, Carver, then the air again. “Templars, soldiers, even a bardic Chantry sister. I mean, how many kinks can you fit into one person?”

“What is a kink?” Justice asked.

Carver frowned at Anders. “Are you repressed?”

“Of course I am,” Anders immediately replied. “How can you have a lasting relationship in a tower where your every action is monitored by strangers with swords?”

Carver pointed out, “You’re a warden recruit now.”

Anders clicked his teeth. “And suddenly everyone wants to talk about their *feelings*.”

Carver shook his head. “You can’t keep running away from your issues, you know.”

Anders pouted. “Do you ever stop talking?”

“I — *you* spoke to *me*!”

“You messed up my cat,” Anders returned.

Carver waved a dismissive hand at Solona when they reached the horses. Solona frowned at him but said nothing as she shared a mount with Sigrun and trotted off after Nathaniel. Anders could be Carver’s problem for a ride.

Carver glanced at the heavy skies nearly one with the fog, noting the sound of wind despite the absence of it. He motioned to his horse. “Get on.”

Anders grudgingly mounted the steed. Carver then patted the horse’s hind, stirring it to move on ahead.

Anders whipped his gaze back. “Wait, aren’t you—?”

“The saddlebags have enough for a ship out of Amaranthine,” Carver shared. “The horse also knows its way back to Vigil’s Keep. No matter what you hear, keep riding.”

The skies’ howling picked up, punctuated with a crack of lightning overhead – no, a skeletal high dragon. The rest of the party ahead jumped, jerking their horses to go after the dragon spirit before it could leave the marshes.

Anders gaped at Carver.

“I told you, didn’t I?” Carver reminded. “I was named after the man who freed my father. Now go.”



One final slap to the horse, and Anders unwittingly bolted ahead into the fog, vanishing with a tabby kitten and a castle-raised horse. Nathaniel would learn to forgive Carver and Anders for the loss.

Carver ran after the rest of the party, eventually finding them in a treeless stretch of marshes.

“By the Paragons!” Sigrun yelled as she threw daggers at the dragon’s joints to no effect. “Are wardens’ daily lives this insane!?”

Solona ran circles around the animated skeleton with one hand on the reins, and the other popping off fireballs. Her mana had to be running dangerously low at this point. From a distance, Nathaniel peppered the dragon with arrows, flustered without a weak point to target. With balance returning to the veil, the dragon that Marcilla had banished to the Fade was now returned, summoning its skeletal parts back together. When Sigrun found a chink in smooth bone and shattered it, everyone’s eyes lit up.

Nathaniel inhaled slowly, drawing his bow.

Carver panted as he raced for the dragon, summoned a smite, and punched its ribs.

*CRACK.*

Solona and Sigrun shouted incredulously as the earth shook with the dragon’s bewildered stagger. Nathaniel exhaled.

*Tink.*

*CrrraasssshhhhHHHHHH!*

Carver and the horses caught themselves as the massive skeleton collapsed, unable to hold itself together. The thrum of magical energy around it bloated and spilled out, uncontrolled, before finally fading.

Solona eyed the assuredly motionless remains. “Whatever this dragon had been while alive, it must have been a monstrous thing.”

Nathaniel wandered over to collect bone shards in disbelief. “Wending Wood?”

Everyone nodded simultaneously. “Wending Wood.”

X

Nathaniel fixed a scroll on a raven, focused. “I don’t see how that Anders could have beaten you to your mount, Ser Carver.”

Carver sat behind the arl, temporarily holding their horse’s reins while Nathaniel was occupied. “I was going to grant him space from his commanding officer.”

“Ah,” Nathaniel acknowledged. The raven took off from his arm.

Sigrun held the reins of her horse while Solona rested behind her in the saddle, low on mana and stamina. “Where is that to?” the rogue curiously asked.

“Vigil’s Keep,” Nathaniel shared. “Lord Albert will receive guidance on how to strengthen the security of Vigil’s Keep, and forward my instructions to Amaranthine City as well. I’ve learned from the commanders in the king’s army that darkspawn tend to stick to soft assaults while amassing numbers, before rushing a heavily-populated target in full force. I suspect that Vigil’s Keep will soon either face its second attack, or Amaranthine City will face its first.”

Nathaniel clicked his teeth in worry. “My farmers must be suffering. We have to hurry and resolve this crisis.”

Nathaniel took the reins from Carver as their flat, grassy path began to twist into the mouth of an overgrown forest. Once they entered the Wending Wood, no skilled whistle from Nathaniel would summon a Howe-trained messenger bird.

It spoke to the Howe family’s long history as protectors of the land that the animals of Amaranthine still remembered them. For the common man, such strength could be found in the Howe’s crest, or heraldry. The Howe shield had hearts and daggers which, in the language of the Waking Seas, meant life and death. Beneath a woodland creature, the brown bear, the shield used to denote that the Howes were a coastal Ferelden force. While the present Howes no longer had naval power, Amaranthine’s naturally steep, insurmountable cliffs ensured no successful invasion would come their direction. The arling’s single port cut through a cliff from the bottom; with a portcullis, it was an easy task to seal off the port at the threat of danger.

The Howes had been the first to train carrier birds, given their relative isolation from the rest of civilization while facing the brunt of raiding forces in the Waking Sea. It didn’t help that Brandel’s Reach, an island essentially occupied by raiders, was just an aisle away from

Amaranthine. There were few other locations likewise shaped by the threat of piracy that had learned to pick up on this mode of communication. Estwatch, for one; Denerim, for another. Due to Estwatch's highly desirable location, however, the onslaught of raids and wars upon the island had seen to the unsustainability of training carrier birds. Ironically enough, only Tevinter matched Ferelden in learning to adopt the method where sending crystals proved too costly to maintain. Of course, carrier pigeons in Tevinter were still a rare sight.

In contrast, the impulsive King Meghren had destroyed Ferelden's rookeries to weaken the locals' communication, allowing him to bulldoze the nation under his chevaliers and quickly set him up on the throne. Orlais still didn't grasp the use of carrier birds to this day.

And birds were *so* last season, according to Leliana.

Speaking of, was that...?

A gaggle of bandits fled in their direction from the Wending Wood, hands flying over their heads and voices wailing. A wooden cart tumbled down a steep bank behind them and flipped over, exploding into flames. The bandits jumped.

"The elf has allies!"

"The elf has come to slay us all!"

"Run!"

Nathaniel and Sigrun spread their horses out to block the path, arrows nocked and daggers ready. The trapped bandits rushed at them with desperate fervour,

—Only for a series of arrows to strike their heels from behind.

Solona perked up in her saddle as a lone archer on a horse stepped out of the Wending Wood, red hair alight with the burning cart's flames. Peeking over the archer's shoulder was a golden hilt.

Carver exhaled fondly as Solona left her horse and ran for the Wending Wood, arms outstretched.

"*Leli!*"

"*Solo!*"

Nathaniel and Sigrun finished off the bandits as Leliana dismounted, picked up Solona, and swung her around into an embrace. Carver would recognise the shape of the sword on her back anywhere.

“Leliana,” Carver greeted as Nathaniel steered their horse over. “You brought Summer Sword.”

Leliana pulled him into a side-hug after he dismounted. Her cornflower blue eyes crinkled. “The others were amused to notice you had vanished into thin air since the middle of the ball, but I thought to also track you down with swiftness. You have a nose for problems, Carver.”

Nathaniel furrowed his brow, trying to follow along. “Are the Grey Wardens sending support soon?”

“Denerim is still heavy in its week-long festivities,” Leliana informed, passing off Summer Sword and its belted sheath to Carver. “A ball will both open and close the week, whereupon the king will have returned by the last day. The Grey Wardens’ leadership was quiet since I last left. From my understanding, Warden-Commander Duncan is prioritising the removal and disposal of the archdemon’s carcass over all else.”

“The archdemon is dead in the water,” Carver recalled. “Literally. I can see how keeping the taint out of the sea would be anyone’s highest priority.”

“All wardens are called to assist, resistant to the taint as they are,” Leliana shared. “Of course some progress was already made before the queen decided on a celebration, but the wardens are hastening to prepare several hundred Joinings. Particularly one for the king.”

And Loghain.

Carver released a small breath at that. Duncan was making good on his promise.

Nathaniel descended from his horse. “So you’re our only back-up?”

Leliana nodded to Carver. “I figure that by the time the warden’s party realised you weren’t just hiding from a promotion, it was too late to sneak out after you. All horses have been prioritised for assisting with the archdemon’s carcass and the king’s arrival. If any warrior or messenger is to find their way out of Denerim, it will be on foot. I was lucky to steal away when I did.”

Nathaniel's lips thinned. "I understand the nobility's hesitance to assist the arling of my father, especially after the blight supposedly ended with the archdemon's death. However, talking darkspawn are *ambushing my roads* and *assaulting my cities*. Amaranthine needs aid."

Leliana's face fell. "I noticed on my way here. I could only drive off bandits from picking at fallen caravans. It seems a Dalish apostate is slaying both merchants and bandits alike, not to speak of the darkspawn lurking throughout these woods."

Sigrun dismounted her horse. "How did you survive the Pilgrim's Path all on your own?"

Leliana and Solona shared a look. "Hm...experience?"

"Well," Nathaniel sighed, "our other mage just ran off. Your assistance would be most appreciated, my lady...?"

"Sister Leliana," the redhead chirped.

Nathaniel eyed her leather armour, quiver, and bow, then the dead bandits who had recently witnessed her skill.

"...Right," Nathaniel muttered.

## Chapter End Notes

Speed of communication has been the rails to several plotlines in DA, even going back to Origins. Players of Orlais' Great Game certainly benefit — and suffer — from their reliance on land-delivered mail where gossip is concerned. In fact, birds appear to be known for just their song or their feathers in Thedas. Only Dorian uses the phrase, "I heard from a little bird," meaning Tevinter also associates birds with messages. Yet Leliana has to have developed her network of carrier ravens *somehow* by the events of Inquisition.

I obviously got busy with ideas.

I also took liberties with the canon timeline. The events of DA2 supposedly start one year after DAO; however, in the ending of Awakening, Anders is said to have taught the next generation of wardens for several years, before being called to the Circle and vanishing. I planned for Anders and kitten!Justice to leave Amaranthine at one point, and I thought after the Blackmarsh was as good a time as any.

# Shemlen

Carver ducked under a flaming branch. “Solona, how are your ice spells!?”

The mage side-stepped with a twirl of her staff and struck it on the ground, only to dodge another attack. “Not my best area!”

Sigrun whipped about with her shortswords, smiling. “Trees smell good.”

Nathaniel and Leliana blinked at her.

“Better than the Deep Roads!” Sigrun defended.

The dwarf hacked at their enemies with shortswords, flinching at the resultant spray of embers while Nathaniel and Leliana fired arrows from a distance. Charred sylvans were stalking the Wending Wood, and whenever Solona directly struck them with her staff, her ice would only last long enough to drip away as water. At Leliana’s disapproving frown, Solona refrained from setting the whole forest on fire.

The sylvans suddenly shoved their gangly arms into the earth, and Carver swiftly ran aside pulling his fellow front-liner, Sigrun, along. A prison of bramble instantly sprung up from the earth, chasing after the two of them before the shrubbery finally tapered off. Sigrun rolled under a monstrous swing while Carver spun around it, whipping his sword out at the closest sylvan’s leg.

“Bloody blondes,” Solona muttered, hooking the crook of her staff over a sylvan’s arm and swinging herself up. “First Anders, now this crazy Dalish woman!”

Solona ran up the sylvan’s arm, hissing at the heat, before shoving her staff down its face and loosing a cone of fire. The warden then summoned a pile of dirt over it, dampening the now thoroughly charred corpse.

Sigrun slipped a corked clay bottle out of her things and threw it at the sylvans. “I guess no holds barred?”

The sylvans blew up in a cloud of lyrium dust.

The party looked at the legionnaire.

Her cheeks dimpled. “In the Legion, they’re called grenades.”

Dwarven explosives were usually reserved for closing off entrances against darkspawn, with a range of power refined for accurate detonation. No dwarf wanted the Deep Roads collapsing over their heads in the process of sealing it. Sigrun probably had a variety of combustibles stowed away in her pack.

Solona descended from her victim. “Why didn’t you throw one of those at the dragon earlier?”

Sigrun sheathed her swords. “What if the dragon unleashed its breath on us while the grenade was in mid-air?”

Everyone shivered.

Leliana scanned the woods. “The Dalish woman who created these sylvans must know we survived.”

“Her animosity is unprecedented,” Nathaniel remarked. “She blames humans for massacring her clan and abducting her sister while she was scouting Amaranthine City. However, my people and I knew of no clan in these parts. Merchants rarely deviate from the Pilgrim’s Path, which means bandits don’t either.”

“Darkspawn,” Carver pointed out. “If they can plan an ambush, they can stage a murder. We should comb these woods for the ones that had orchestrated this. They must be monitoring the path from nearby, and should thus have some manner of evidence between themselves. We might even find that woman’s missing sister.”

The party agreed and strayed from the merchant’s road for the dense forest around them. Carver had rushed into this plot for a reason. It bade well for no one that darkspawn were growing intelligent enough to recognise surfacers’ social issues and emphasise them. While Warden Utha, the Architect, and the Mother likely couldn’t convey the full history of elven and human animosities to awakened darkspawn, it didn’t mean they couldn’t teach them to take advantage of it.

Despite the fact that Carver had discovered and helped end the blight several months earlier than canon, he hadn’t been able to buy Amaranthine time against this crisis. Warden Utha had evidently succeeded in her experiments sooner, due to darkspawn kidnapping more wardens from the Clash at Ostagar and making warden blood more accessible.

Carver swallowed his guilt.

The party quickly tore through a darkspawn camp in the woods, found an elven locket in it, and tripped over a tainted bandit. The brigand begged for relief, revealing that darkspawn had wiped both his band and the Dalish clan out before planting the bandits' weapons in the clan's camp. The darkspawn had left him to suffer, and either die or become a darkspawn. Solona's face hardened as she accepted a dagger from Leliana and swiftly, painlessly killed the bandit.

They eventually stumbled over the remains of a Dalish encampment, where human weapons littered the outskirts. Further in were clumsy rows of shallow graves. Only one bivouac stood high, the dirt in front of it worn and trampled.

"I won't stop."

The party whirled around to see the Dalish woman leaning on a wooden stake behind them.

She rested her staff's butt on the ground. "Return my sister, and I'll leave these woods. Of course, I only need *one* messenger."

Carver held out the elven locket at the same time the trees rustled overhead with sudden wind.

The woman bolted up, the rustling dying out. "How do you have my sister's locket!?"

Carver held out a hand behind him as the woman rushed forward, snatching the trinket from his grasp. The party shifted behind Carver, delaying a draw of their weapons as he explained the darkspawn's manipulation to the elf.

The woman pursed her lips. "Seranni would never willingly part with this. If you speak true, shemlen...then I've killed innocent people."

Nathaniel interjected. "The Wending Wood is still unsafe, so long as these darkspawn haunt the area. As the arl of Amaranthine, I will remember your help in restoring peace to the forest, should you give it."

"I can solve this myself." The woman lifted a blistering, hurt gaze. "Why would I want *your* help?"

Carver glanced back, noting Nathaniel's stiff expression. The arl's



mind was currently a war room, trying to negotiate the justice demanded of the woman's actions, and the fact that delivering such justice on a misled elf would shake Amaranthine's young stability. Nathaniel was already working tirelessly on digging the arling out of the political mess his father had buried it in. The city elves of Denerim would no doubt criticise Nathaniel's actions from certain angles, and the elves had grown more influential in recent months.

Carver cut in. "We would be more eyes to find your sister."

The woman hesitated while Carver saw Leliana hold Nathaniel back in his periphery.

Finally, the elf straightened. "I am Velanna of Clan Ilshae, and Seranni is the last of my family. I would do anything for her." She pivoted off. "Come, there is an abandoned mine north of here. The darkspawn spill out of there, from what I've observed."

As the party hesitantly followed from a distance, Leliana pulled Nathaniel and Carver further back to whisper. "Carver can find a way to diplomatically balance the scales, arl. Isn't that right?"

Carver shot her a look. "I don't have an answer for everything. Still... Arl Nathaniel, has Lord Eddelbrek of the Feravel Plains pushed for more protection since your induction?"

Nathaniel blinked. "He and Bann Esmerelle have always been at odds with each other. Lord Eddelbrek is the largest farm-holder of Amaranthine, second only in importance to Bann Esmerelle who owns the City of Amaranthine. Both require armed troops for protection. My father *had* catered to Bann Esmerelle's needs, before I learned that this left our farmlands destitute. I have since provisioned resources to the Feravel Plains."

Sigrun perked up with a whisper. "I thought the capital here was Amaranthine City?"

"The City of Amaranthine refers to the bannorn," Leliana helped.

Because Fereldens.

"Lord Eddelbrek is still insisting for more aid, though," Carver deduced. "His farmers may have learned to take matters into their own hands. Clan Ilshae's camp bears scorch marks consistent with months' old fire, and the charred sylvans Velanna had animated and set alight were all northwest of the camp. Hafter River runs from the

Feravel Plains down south to the west of the Wending Wood. Farmers could have traversed south to dissuade Clan Ilshae from their farmland by burning the clan's camp. It also explains why bandits have been pushed this far out from the plains."

Nathaniel groaned, rubbing his temples. "Poverty will drive anyone to desperate lengths, and the Howes are at fault for not granting proper protection. Still, I can't excuse farmers from threatening Dalish with fire, and Velanna from killing innocent people."

Solona hummed from the side. "Blame the deaths on bandits."

"And sweep Velanna's crime under the table?" Nathaniel curtly rejected.

It would motivate the Howe family to grant protection to the Feravel Plains and routinely sweep the Pilgrim's Path. It would also give them an excuse to take troops from Amaranthine City. As for compensation to the merchants' families, the Howes could take on the burden. Carver believed Nathaniel could see it done, given how quickly Carver expected Amaranthine would economically recover under the arl's insight. However, Carver didn't envy the unfair work ahead of Nathaniel if the Howe family did so.

Carver's lips thinned. "There's no good solution before us at present. Let's focus on the immediate matter for now."

Everyone agreed and followed Valenna down into an abandoned silverite mine. Aged wooden planks creaked under their feet, and rotting ropes swayed from rusty pulleys as they descended a roughly-hewn tunnel of rock. Sunlight filtered past the Wending Wood's towering trees, past underbrush, before finally scattering against the white-blue lustre of silverite ores that ran along their path in protruding bands.

Where the original miners had struggled opening up the earth between the ores, the darkspawn had apparently dug more thoroughly without care for ease of movement. The party sometimes had to navigate toppled disks of ore and earth, or crawl low enough to hear the trepidation rapidly beating in their chests. When their path finally opened up into the remains of a multi-storied mine complex, everyone collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

Carver squinted through the dim cavern. Though the chains of silverite no longer carried the sunlight this far, the amber haze of torches around the corner lent his sight a sense of colour again. When

able, darkspawn lit light sources where they could, even alone in the Deep Roads.

Solona shifted between two tunnels, loose silt and rock pushed away from both. “I sense darkspawn...everywhere ahead.”

Velanna shoved past her to inspect the tunnels. “We’ll just have to go down both of these to find my sister.”

Nathaniel cut in. “We should make sure we can still return to the surface.”

Carver shook his head. “Though darkspawn dig with their hands, their tunnels are stable no matter the type of earth they burrow through. Even before Amaranthine discovered those sentient darkspawn, normal darkspawn have been capable of making highways to the surface for centuries, particularly in the hinterlands of Tevinter and the Anderfels. They just lack a sense for the surface’s location without an archdemon’s direction.”

Nathaniel looked at him. “How do you know this?”

“It was in a book,” Carver dismissed. “By Brother Florian, I believe.”

Nathaniel turned thoughtful. “I’ve read Brother Genitivi, but I’ve never read Brother Florian — wait. Brother Florian of Churneau? The Orlesian?”

“I guess,” Carver replied.

“You can read Orlesian?” Nathaniel remarked.

“Not well,” Carver corrected. “I heavily rely on context clues, and I’m sure my pronunciation is so cringeworthy as to be weaponized.”

Leliana blinked. “You *taught* yourself Orlesian?”

Carver internally panicked. “It...uh...shares enough terms on paper with Sp—Rivaini for me to deduce what I’m reading, and from there, how it’s conjugated.”

“Do you also know Antivan?” Nathaniel asked.

“...I’ve had a passing interest,” Carver admitted.

Sweet Maker, he felt like he was being interrogated. Nathaniel and Leliana’s attention was in reality pointless. Antivan had a Latinised

alphabet like Orlesian and strongly resembled a language Carver was familiar with: Italian. However, the language of Antiva's capital was a dialect that also had a remarkably high lexical similarity with Spanish, and was only legible for Carver by using his understanding of both Italian and Spanish to translate it.

The *best* Carver could describe it, the region must have witnessed a disparity like *langue d'oc* and *langue d'oïl* that with political borders had eventually been standardised and recognised as Rivaini and eastern Antivan. Most of Antiva seemed to practise modern Italian, while the coastal Antiva City spoke its Spanish-Italian dialect. Thus while Carver could probably read and grasp Antivan text, he wouldn't be able to effortlessly read anything from Antiva's capital, which was what produced most intellectual works he would come across anyway.

Velanna rolled her eyes. "So the answer is the same: we take either tunnel first."

The party stepped forward for one tunnel, before stumbling. Carver caught himself on Nathaniel, who bonelessly collapsed on the ground. Everyone around Carver began dropping like flies as a sweet thought crept to the forefront of his mind.

The desire to sleep.

Carver knelt, then lied on his side. Against his will, his eyelids drooped closed.

Above him in an alcove of the cavern, he barely made out the figures of an armoured dwarf, and a spindly humanoid physically fused with long robes and a headdress.

X

The party woke up together on a bed of dried grass wearing nothing but their smallclothes.

It sounded like the start to a spicy Antivan novel, however it felt like anything but. Carver fought a splitting headache as he sat up to the sight of decrepit stonework and metal bars. The original miners had apparently known to carve out and maintain a jail, given they had essentially been their own law enforcement while in isolation. The darkspawn had taken full advantage of it. Carver couldn't shake the bars free, and he lacked the tools to attempt the door lock.

Velanna moaned. "Where are we?"

Nathaniel and Solona leaned on the bars, livid.

“The darkspawn took my grandfather’s bow from me,” the former muttered.

“And Richu’s staff,” the latter added.

“Darkspawn?” Leliana echoed. “That tall, grey thing counts as one?”

“You saw him too?” Sigrun noted. “He was with a dwarven ghoul, but they both watched us fall asleep with eerie calmness. They seem more sane than the talking darkspawn.”

“They’re in charge,” Carver exhaled, leaning his forehead on a bar. “It was faint, but the dwarven ghoul’s armour had griffons on it. The tall darkspawn was also wearing a fine dress of resilient material, if tattered and dirtied with time. The pattern was unlike any culture’s I’ve seen, meaning the tall darkspawn hails from either obscure origins, or old and nearly forgotten ones. Either way, he possesses the magical skill to put us to sleep, and must predate the creation of the darkspawn we’ve encountered so far.”

Solona frowned. “Meaning he could have created them. Including the one that emissary called ‘Mother.’”

Leliana touched Solona’s shoulder in silent concern.

A rattle beyond the sight of their cell immediately had everyone on their feet, before an elven ghoul with branching face tattoos crept over.

Velanna leapt at the bars. “Seranni! Creators, what have they done to you!?”

The ghoul lowered a hand, wincing. “Shh, Velanna. I don’t have much time before the others check on all of you, and I can’t be caught down here.”

Sigrun gaped. “You’re a sentient ghoul?”

“She’s my *sister*,” Velanna vehemently denied.

Seranni unlocked their cell and smiled grimly. “No time to explain, but I can say that this was my choice. These darkspawn are like us, Velanna. They seek freedom and coexistence with a world trained to hate them. They’re just children who know only violence but are

capable of learning peace.”

The young ghoul quickly vanished down the hall as Velanna threw the cell door open and vainly debated which doors down the end Seranni could have taken.

“Seranni, wait! Wait!”

One of the doors swung open to reveal a group of armoured darkspawn.

Carver felt himself, confirming even his hidden dagger had been taken. “Blood and ashes,” he swore.

Velanna’s face turned thunderous as she slammed her knees and hands on the ground. A sudden tremor consumed the floor and walls, then a sprout of large tree roots, then——

*SHHHK!*

A splash of blood.

Carver removed his undershirt and threw it over the smallest pool of blood. The party briskly crossed for the door the darkspawn had opened before anyone could touch the taint.

They warily crept through the remains of a recently refashioned mine complex, now home to gruesome, disturbing, and apparently failed experiments. Carver stopped counting the number of human, elven, or dwarven corpses strapped to a stone slab or pierced with needles that the party passed. The corpses were all in various stages of the taint.

Solona’s hands balled into fists at the sight.

Unsure where they were headed, the party slunk down any tunnel with sufficient torchlight. When they crossed paths with animated yet lifeless failed experiments, Solona and Velanna together wiped them out. Everyone was disgusted to notice that not only was their stolen gear on these failed experiments, but that the experiments matched the gear’s owner by race and gender. Paranoia sprouted up Carver’s back like a rash as he donned his finery, armour, dagger, and Summer Sword that had just come off a ghoul. Fortunately, Solona could heal everyone of open wounds as a spirit healer to avoid the risk of anyone acquiring the taint.

Carver knew the Architect’s intentions for his experimentations, but

he still struggled to comprehend the reality.

Unfortunately, due to the party's noise, darkspawn and dragonlings began stomping for their direction. Carver motioned for Leliana to join him in room clearing now that they had their gear, and the bard quickly agreed, falling in line behind him. Without a mabari, the task was difficult, but the method was solid enough for just the two of them to lead the way through unknown spaces. Velanna learned to restrain herself from unleashing an earthquake or a bramble prison while her allies were charging at nearby enemies. The party even found and picked up a preserved dragon egg in the process. They managed to develop a sense of synergy before they stumbled into a great hallway whereupon its stone doors closed behind them.

Above from another floor stood a spindly darkspawn, a dwarven ghoul, and Seranni.

Solona glared at Utha. "Have you forgotten the Order, traitor, or are you a lowly thief!?"

Next to the dwarven ghoul, the Architect raised a hand.

Carver eyed the many tunnels in the hall's ceiling. "They're not here to talk, Solona, they're here to watch. We're in the middle of an experiment!"

*KraaaaaaaaAAA!*

Two tainted dragons violently descended from the tunnels, clawing at the party. Everyone scattered like ants in time to dodge a snap of tainted fangs. The dragon thralls skittered on the ground without the gas to keep them afloat, and pivoted hard for the nearest prey.

Carver cut in with his sword to buy Leliana time to leap back.

The bard avenged him with two swift arrows. "The righteous stand before the darkness, and the Maker shall guide their hand!"

A dragon thrall threw its head aside with a piercing screech, blinded in one eye.

Carver rushed the other blind one while it wailed, catching a snap of its jaws with Summer Sword. The beautiful golden blade lit up a blinding holy white before Carver unleashed a smite with a heavy slash.

*KRAAAAA!*

***BOOM.***

Carver pressed his advantage with a surgical jab of his blade. His utmost trust in Leliana had him unflinchingly engage while arrows barely missed him and struck the dragon thrall. Aside, fire and stone fists beset the thrall's counterpart. For better or worse, the dragon thralls were only capable of spreading fear and the taint, and not also breathing elements. That, or the Architect was curious how long his experiments would last without using their breath. The Architect had irritating high faith in a warden's ability to survive the test, as if "wardens can't die" was merely a fact.

The hall suddenly trembled.

In unison, Carver leapt back with Leliana as the tremors crescendoed into a bursting forest of sharpened tree roots. The dragon thralls barely managed a squawk before the roots violently twisted together and drilled straight through them. Velanna then grit her teeth and rose both hands to the sky, spearing the drill at their indifferent audience.

In a perfect circle around Utha and the Architect, the wood flurried into harmless fibres.

Seranni briefly glanced at her sister who had directed the drill away from her, then looked to the Architect. The spindly darkspawn lowered a hand, peered at Solona, then wordlessly turned away.

Seranni and Utha followed him.

"Seranni?" Velanna cried out.

It was in vain. The Architect collapsed his side of the hallway with a gesture, sealing off any access to where the three tainted bystanders had departed from. Seranni evidently supported the Architect's experiments to any length.

The earth shuddered, and Carver quickly pushed everyone to run for the closest opening. Velanna's shock and the exhaustion of facing two dragon thralls seemed to steal the strength from everyone's limbs, turning their fleeing for the surface into a desperate escape from a sinkhole. When they finally reached solid ground beneath the shade of emerald trees, everyone collapsed, panting. The Architect had seen fit to completely rid of surface access to the Deep Roads.



Velanna shook her head. “I don’t understand. The darkspawn have misled Seranni somehow, twisted her beyond the limits of her body.”

While burying her kin in shallow graves, Velanna hadn’t noticed that the darkspawn under the Architect had captured *two* elves from her clan, a male and Seranni. Based on a tattooed corpse the party had passed in the mines, the male had committed suicide under their experiments, while Seranni had survived and come to sympathise with them.

“When in capture,” Carver breathed, “victims might develop affection for their captors as a self-defence mechanism for their minds.”

Velanna whipped her gaze to Solona. “You’re a Grey Warden, yes? They say wardens can sense darkspawn even deep underground.”

Solona breathlessly nodded.

“Then I’m swearing into your Order,” Velanna stated as fact. “I will find my sister through whatever means necessary, and speak with her.”

Leliana wiped sweat from her crooked brow. “You might die in the Joining.”

“I do not fear *death*,” Velanna scolded. “My sister means everything to me. Enlist me now.”

Solona’s breathing steadied. “I can’t. Not until Warden-Commander Duncan completes the Joinings needed in Denerim.”

“Then I pledge my service to you,” Velanna declared. “Don’t think of trying to lose me.”

Nathaniel blinked at the flipped statement, then surrendered to the absurdity.

“The Order is a lifelong devotion,” Sigrun pointed out to Velanna. “Should you ever find and convince your sister to leave the darkspawn, you will still be sworn to a life separate from hers. There might be other ways to search for Seranni.”

“Yet none more efficient than taking on Warden abilities,” Velanna dismissed. “It’s enough to know she’ll be safe after I reason with her. What are we waiting for? Let’s find more darkspawn.”

It was at that moment a ring of arrows were drawn at the party.

Carver scanned their surroundings, confirming that a crowd of Dalish were warily observing the people that had crawled out of an abandoned mine.

One of the Dalish archers lowered his bow. “Velanna?”

“Marren,” Velanna recognised, tone softening. “You found a new clan.”

The ring of arrows hesitantly dispersed, the Dalish dismissing the warden’s party as they continued their trek through the woods. The party stood up and joined the archer, Marren, atop a forest floor that was at higher elevation.

Marren replaced his arrow in his quiver and loosened his bow. “Just because we disagreed with you, did you believe we wouldn’t be able to find a clan to accept us?”

Velanna’s jaw clenched. “I never said that. You had a choice to stay.”

“The First wanted to attack Amaranthine City,” Marren mocked, “and half of the clan agreed with her suicidal mission. What choice did you think the rest of us had?”

Velanna faltered from hugging Marren in a greeting usually suited for clanmates. “...I’m glad that it sounds like you and the rest are happy now.”

Marren pivoted off with a sneer.

Velanna called out to him. “If you see Seranni, please...be understanding and patient with her.”

Marren froze.

Then muttered. “My clan and I spotted darkspawn creeping north through nature along the Pilgrim’s Path. Stick to the road. And...I’m sorry about what happened to the clan.” The archer continued walking without looking back.

Nathaniel straightened up. “The Pilgrim’s Path...!”

“Vigil’s Keep is in danger,” Solona recognised.

“And Amaranthine City,” Leliana agreed. “We must support both

quickly.”

The party hurriedly raced for the Pilgrim’s Path cutting through the Wending Wood, then north for where their horses awaited, tied to the forest’s last few trees near a stream.

“We don’t have enough people or time,” Nathaniel cursed. “All of you – I ask you to take the wardens from Vigil’s Keep and defend Amaranthine City in my stead. I will protect my family’s home myself.”

Carver placed a hand on Solona’s arm before she could protest. “I’m coming with you, arl. Solona, there’s a guard-constable named Aidan where you go; seal off the city’s smuggler tunnels with his help. He should be up-to-date on Amaranthine’s smuggling problem. This will give the darkspawn less means to infiltrate the city.”

“Got it.” Solona returned Carver’s firm grip. “Be safe, cousin.”

“And you.”

# Invader

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for the hearts everyone! Trust me, even a comment that's only hearts feeds my creativity. Enjoy the chapter!

The soldiers of Vigil's Keep flitted about within the keep's walls, racing to complete last-minute fortifications. The two wardens remaining in the keep were Kristoff and Swift, whom Solona left as provisional warden support. The first few darkspawn had already hit the keep's walls, though everyone was hyper-aware that they were only build-up to the main assault. Attuned to the heavy atmosphere, grey clouds had rolled in, showering Vigil's Keep in a rain that grew heavier by the minute.

Carver tied his sword belt to his waist as he briskly walked towards the inner bailey. Kristoff and Swift opened the main doors for him to pass, then slipped out themselves. The doors would be barricaded in the event the darkspawn invaded as far as the inner bailey, and the keep's soldiers couldn't hold their ground anymore.

For now, Nathaniel coordinated half of his soldiers to the outer ramparts, and the other half to the inner ramparts. Both walls connected to the main building, so that the soldiers stationed there could retreat before ground forces could reach and overwhelm them. Nathaniel would lead a unit to meet the ground forces. The unit could also use the walls to retreat if there were soldiers on the ramparts to allow them in. Everyone else who couldn't fight was sequestered in the highest floors of the main building.

Nathaniel snatched Carver past the main doors. "You should lead the squad in the inner bailey."

"You're an arl," Carver refused. "Your protection is my priority."

Nathaniel's lips twisted but said nothing as the two of them approached the edge of the main building's front stairs. Two squads stood at attention below them.

Carver rested his sword sheathed at his side and straightened, raising his voice. "Soldiers of Vigil's Keep! I understand you might know of me. Some of your brothers fought alongside me against the archdemon in Ostagar – and again in Denerim! I am Ser Carver of

Maric's Shield, and I am here to help you royally defeat the darkspawn!"

The crowd of armour below shifted with sudden energy that Carver couldn't read past the blinding sheet of rain. Beside him, he could feel Nathaniel briefly turn.

Carver narrowed his focus to the task ahead. "Arl Nathaniel and I saw to the blight's defeat in Denerim. Trust in our strategy!"

Carver turned to Nathaniel, who cleared his throat. "For Vigil's Keep! To your battle stations!"

The squads split away for their positions in the inner and outer baileys. Nathaniel followed Carver for the latter.

"Carver?" Nathaniel repeated. "*The* Carver?"

Furrowed brows answered him. "What do you mean?"

"It's a common name," Nathaniel defended, hurrying to match Carver's pace. "The songs are Ferelden, but bardic in structure. If not Orlesian, then at least – *inspired*. Fereldens like to pretend otherwise, but Orlesian commoners who settled here during the Rebellion have assimilated. Our present culture has Orlesian influence."

Carver shot him a look. "You've met Leliana."

Nathaniel was still talking. "Everyone is addressed by their surname outside of Ferelden, so of course Carver is a filler name for the common man or woman. 'Anyone can be a hero,' and all that. Even if there's a Ser Carver in Maric's Shield, it doesn't make them the subject of the songs – except I've *met* you." Nathaniel halted. "Leliana?"

Carver stopped and turned.

"Sister Leliana was a bard?" Nathaniel spluttered and kept walking. "The Maker has a sense of humour."

Carver followed him. Nathaniel only made sense, really; Carver *was* originally named after Ser Maurevar Carver, the Kirkwall Templar. The general public likely believed "Carver" to be a surname, like "Smith."

"*Contact!*" the ramparts cried out.

The outer portcullis shattered under the weight of an ogre. The inner

portcullis immediately dropped closed behind Nathaniel and Carver as darkspawn rushed into the keep.

Summer Sword unsheathed in a flash. “Kristoff! Swift!”

The two wardens pincer the darkspawn from either side of the outer portcullis, blades swinging. Nathaniel and Carver lured the ogre away while their squad attacked the darkspawn pouring in. With pinpoint accuracy on the ogre’s tendons and a smite to deliver spirit damage, Nathaniel and Carver felled the ogre in front of the inner portcullis, blocking the darkspawn from attempting the same strategy.

One sweep of the grounds confirmed that the darkspawn’s assault was faltering. The rain had muddied the earth, slowing the darkspawn’s approach to the keep’s walls until they were basically sitting ducks. The keep’s archers had wiped out most of the invading force before the portcullis had been breached.

A cry suddenly resounded from the inner bailey. “*Darkspawn from underground!*”

Nathaniel flinched in its direction. “Maker’s breath,” he whispered in horror.

Carver decidedly grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the wall’s passage leading to the main building. Without dwarven explosives to clear up the keep’s lower foundations, and without dwarven master stonemasons to enable the ancient dwarven seals down there, it was *fractionally* possible for darkspawn to dig their way to the surface. When Carver had hinted to Nathaniel about the possibility earlier, they had both agreed that Vigil’s Keep couldn’t afford to plan around the unlikelihood given their limited resources.

Now, the arl’s face was pale under his leather helmet. “Delilah is in her room with the nursemaids. They have no weapons between them!”

Carver yelled over his shoulder. “Swift, you’re alpha now!”

“Understood!” the warden returned, and barked orders for the outer bailey’s squad.

Carver and Nathaniel raced into the keep where the inner bailey’s squad had already run in and engaged with the invading darkspawn. Nathaniel deftly cleared out the main hall with a rain of arrows, not one blink at the effort. Carver exasperatedly cut down a darkspawn’s

arrow before it could hit the arl. Were all archers bloody gifted, or was Carver just unskilled?

Faint female screams echoed down the keep.

“Delilah!” Nathaniel called out, searching.

With Carver’s curt instruction, they cleared the keep’s rooms together. When they ran out of darkspawn to kill, they circled the floors, then sprinted up the keep’s many stairs. A glance out the keep’s windows confirmed that only stragglers remained; Vigil’s Keep had survived the assault. Carver hoped for similar success with Solona and the Wardens. Amaranthine’s forested land, cliff-riddled north, and history with animals evidently bred fine archers out of its citizens.

Nathaniel broke into his sister’s room. “Delilah—!”

Carver rushed in, then just as quickly backed out and turned around. He heard Nathaniel’s shocked approach to Delilah’s bloody bed as the nursemaids parted.

“Nate,” Delilah exhaled sweetly. “Isn’t he beautiful?”

Alfred spoke. “Why don’t you hold him?”

Nathaniel’s half-cloak fluttered. His voice left him roughly, carrying only syllables.

Carver softly closed the door behind him.

Delilah’s voice drifted from the crack as it closed. “We want to name him Eirian, after Mummy.”

X

“That wasn’t so bad,” Sigrun remarked. “I thought a darkspawn assault would be like in the Deep Roads, where they don’t stop coming until you blow everything up.”

The warden’s party was reunited in the main hall of Vigil’s Keep, with the exception of Nathaniel.

Solona crossed her arms where she sat. “The darkspawn who attacked Vigil’s Keep and Amaranthine City were part of a faction under ‘the Mother.’ After our work in Knotwood Hills, they apparently came at us with what darkspawn they had left.”

"If the Messenger is to be trusted," Velanna scoffed. "I still don't see why you let it go."

"It gave us information about the other faction," Leliana pointed out. "It even fought alongside us against the Mother's army. The Messenger isn't like other darkspawn."

Solona sighed. "Your forgiveness knows no bounds, Leli."

The redhead leaned into her. "That's what you like about me."

Solona huffed but tellingly tolerated Leliana's weight.

Velanna rose a brow. "That's it, then. You'll let any darkspawn live if you can craft an excuse for it."

Solona's steel blue eyes flashed warningly, startling even Sigrun peacefully sitting next to her. "*Never* accuse me of that again."

Velanna lifted her chin. "Very well. You obviously approach darkspawn problems without bias."

"Do you have an issue with me?" Solona curtly asked. "With humans?"

Velanna blinked. "I don't see how that's relevant here."

"You've been short since we've met," Solona stated. "You swear yourself to my purpose, but you question me at every step. Are you sure you want to join the Wardens?"

"Solona," Carver intervened.

"No," Solona rejected. "I want to hear her response."

Velanna clicked her tongue. "I hate humans in general. As for my questions, it's to inform me on your leadership, seeing as you're the only real warden these lands have right now."

Solona flatly echoed, "My leadership."

Velanna nodded. "The darkspawn stage murders, plan ambushes, and attack cities, and you don't think despite their internal conflict that they won't *lie* to you? How are you sure that the darkspawn who attacked Vigil's Keep the first time were also under this Mother?"

"The Messenger said its master, the Architect, wishes no quarrel with



wardens,” Solona replied. “The Architect has to know that attacking human cities is the same as picking a fight with us.”

“So the Messenger claims,” Velanna allowed, “but its master might be withholding information from it. Unless the Messenger is one of the Architect’s limbs, it can’t truly know its master’s thoughts.”

“The Messenger’s words are worth verifying,” Solona defended.

“You’ll risk your life doing so?” Velanna pressed.

Solona frowned, losing her patience. “All these questions just to inform you on my leadership? Just say you doubt me.”

“I don’t doubt your intentions,” Velanna stated. “As a former Keeper in training, I advise you to heed history. After all, humanity’s internal conflict didn’t stop them from wiping the elves out of the Dales.”

Silence fell over their table.

Leliana’s eyes flitted to Carver, who only placed a hand over his face. He had tried to intervene and warn them – both Solona and Velanna. One side didn’t think about the other’s long history, while the other was ignorant of the other’s recent history. Carver had to give Velanna credit, though. The woman had overcome the intellectual hurdle the fastest of the party, fully believing that the talking darkspawn were as sentient as the rest of Thedas’s races. Seranni’s situation was all the evidence Velanna needed.

The warden’s party didn’t know that the Architect was the spindly darkspawn they had encountered earlier, but they still unknowingly faced a grave issue. The talking darkspawn were essentially a “new” sentient race still in its infancy. Could the wardens collectively condemn them because the darkspawn only knew violence?

Nathaniel walked in, thankfully providing a distraction. “Despite all the stress, the local Sister says that Delilah is well on her way to recovery from the nonnatus procedure.”

The term derived from Tevene, meaning “not born,” as it referred to a Caesarean section.

The arl sat down at the table with a relieved sigh. “Delilah is on a strict, highly nutritional diet in the meantime. The sooner we can rid Amaranthine of this darkspawn problem, the sooner goods can flow in as usual. Warden Solona, are you able to sense where the rest of the

talking darkspawn might be hiding?”

Solona cleared her throat, spreading out a map of Amaranthine. “Usually, the taint is an ambient presence in the back of my head. However, when I cleared out smuggler tunnels in Amaranthine City, I felt a draw to the west. Be they the Mother’s, the Architect’s, or talking at all, there’s a dense presence of darkspawn out there.”

Nathaniel frowned, tracing the land west of Amaranthine City. Beyond the immediate suburbs around Amaranthine City, the Feravel Plains stretched west all the way to Tarcaisne Ridge, where the arling ended in the mountainous region and Soldier’s Peak began. The lords in the suburbs answered to Bann Esmerelle, while Lord Eddelbrek answered directly to Arl Nathaniel. While unconventional, the hierarchy was generally accepted given the differing needs and sizes between the City of Amaranthine and the Feravel Plains.

“If the Mother’s army came south along the Pilgrim’s Path,” Nathaniel contemplated, “they must have been utilising Deep Roads connected to the mines in Wending Wood and, to an extent, Knotwood Hills. You might have sensed the Architect’s darkspawn.”

“The Deep Roads stretch everywhere,” Sigrun reminded. “The darkspawn may have found a route connecting those places to the Feravel Plains as well. The Mother could be using the plains as a secret base to only access via underground.”

Nathaniel sighed. “Either way, Lord Eddelbrek hasn’t reported any darkspawn in his lands, to which I thank the Maker. Amaranthine can ill afford our only farmlands being poisoned by the taint. If it’s the Architect’s faction hiding in the plains, then I’m inclined to believe that the Messenger spoke true of his master, and that the Architect’s faction doesn’t desire conflict with humans.”

“Only one way to find out,” Carver summarised. “There are ancient Tevinter ruins here, in the north-west region of the Feravel Plains.”

Eyes followed Carver’s finger on the map. “The Dragonbone Wastes?”

“Where dragons go to die,” Leliana quoted a tale.

Carver nodded. “Dragons used to burrow deep into the earth there where they would lay for eternal rest. The ancient Imperium thus built a city upon it called Drake’s Fall to use dragon bones for crafting, before the Imperium was pushed out. If darkspawn are hiding somewhere with access to the surface, it’s here.”

Nathaniel straightened. "Then we move for Drake's Fall at once."

When everyone rose to gear up and depart, Carver discreetly pulled Solona aside.

"If the Mother is there," Carver murmured, "we can expect resistance. May I suggest you and a few others take the party's rear? Protect our backs?"

Solona frowned. "And leave the rest of you to descend underground alone?"

Carver hesitated. "You know what 'the Mother' means."

Solona clenched her jaw, eyes darting aside. "A talking broodmother." She whipped her gaze to Carver with a heated whisper. "But she's evil! The Mother betrayed her emissary in the Blackmarsh, and set up a production of broodmothers in Knotwood Hills. Had she any humanity, she wouldn't have done those things."

"She's not your responsibility to stop," Carver struck deeply.

Solona stilled.

Carver sighed. "I'm sorry, I don't want to be someone who makes you cry every time we talk."

"No," Solona sharply gasped, "no, Leliana has been saying much of the same. You both care about me. Besides, I have no more tears to shed."

"Then..."

"*I'm finishing this*," Solona decided, gesturing to the overall conflict. "The Maker *himself* can't stop me."

Carver followed his cousin as she pivoted off for the stables. "Then I will stand by you through the end."

X

The warden's party arrived at Drake's Fall at night, when the full moon blanketed the wasteland in a colourless scale of grey where the ruins rose, white where dragon bones pierced shadows, and black where blood spilled.

The Architect's hurlocks were indeed engaged with Childer hatchlings and adults, fighting to penetrate the Mother's lair that hid

underground.

The high dragon, however, was just the cherry on top.

Velanna furiously bloomed thorny vegetation around darkspawn while Solona threw fireballs and Sigrun tossed grenades. Nathaniel and Leliana fired long-range support, but Carver had the pleasure of distracting and fighting off the dragon all on his own. Apparently, *helping* to kill three dragons or so meant he could handle one.

“Stop smiting!” Velanna complained.

Carver rolled aside dragon breath. “Just stay behind me!”

Solona summoned a firestorm, which dissipated in a perfect cone from Carver to around the dragon. A vacuum of hot, dry air immediately sucked in, startling everyone’s loose clothes up in a brief, sudden wind.

Solona pointed. “That’s his smite range, Velanna! Avoid it!”

Carver lit up Summer Sword in another smite and swung, grumbling. At least some of her fire had baked the dragon, though that seemed to just infuriate the overgrown lizard.

Summer Sword lodged itself into the dragon’s neck, and Carver swung himself up over the beast, jerking his blade out in one motion. Dragon blood splashed against the ground in a sharp arc. The dragon’s screech rattled Carver’s skull as he raced up the neck with criss-crossing slashes before shoving his sword down the dragon’s snout. Carver wound up another visualisation of world order before bursting the dragon’s head open with an unconcentrated smite. Compared to the cone, this one exploded in a rush of white fire like in Redcliffe Castle.

The dragon collapsed like a brick building.

Carver wrenched his sword free and slid down to rejoin the party, which had cleared out darkspawn from the surface. While he had been occupied, Sigrun had managed to find a sturdy entrance into the ruins.

The legionnaire leaned away from Carver as he drew close to stealth with her. “You’re sweaty.”

Carver wiped grime and hair back away from his face. “I miss my armour.”

“Then none of us would be able to sneak in like this,” Solona pointed out.

The party navigated down spiralling staircases without bannisters and sometimes part of a step. When they jumped across stairs or down to a floor, bulbous flesh popped under their feet, leaking black blood between stone tiles. A familiar fleshy texture ran everywhere in the ruins, growing thicker the farther down they descended. Carver shuddered and frequently glanced at Solona, who was breathing heavily even as the rush of battle passed.

Whenever the party crossed paths with the Architect’s and Mother’s forces fighting each other, Solona was the first to mercilessly demolish them. Sometimes she would even shapeshift into a spider or bear and tear their enemies apart with her teeth.

Leliana spoke from behind Solona. “Reserve your mana for bigger fights.”

Solona’s voice carried a tremor. “Right.”

Nathaniel held a hand over his nose as a green mist became discernible to the naked eye. The arl toed scattered crystals with runes on them, shifting the yellow minerals around. It seemed the mist arose not from neglected magic, but from some manner of waste running deep underground. Like the decay of dragon corpses.

And the limbs of a broodmother so massive, her most distant appendages simply rotted with disuse.

Carver fixed the crystals to the ground where hexagonal cavities matched their shapes. When Nathaniel raised a brow, Carver shook his head. “Might stabilise the ruins. We’ll never know when we’ll need to beat an explosion out of here.”

It was a fake excuse, but a believable one all the same.

That was when the Architect stepped into sight from a floor above, followed by Utha. The ghoul drew her blade, but the Architect held a hand out.

“No, Utha, this is not how we must begin.” The spindly darkspawn floated down with precise magic and landed in front of the party. “I regret our first meeting, warden. I had restrained you and your company in the mines with hopes to avoid the misunderstanding that arose in Vigil’s Keep. I should have known that the people there would

have interpreted my scouts as an invading party.”

Solona shoved her staff in front of her warningly. “Architect. So those *were* your darkspawn. You’re no better than the Mother.”

The Architect didn’t flinch at the animosity. “My people are still learning how to communicate. When I break them free of the Call, they are at first flustered, and still learning. Peace, I pray you, warden.”

Leliana narrowed her eyes behind her drawn bow. “The Call?”

“Darkspawn want for nothing,” the Architect pointed out. “We do not hunger or strive for power; when a blight begins, it is because the Old Gods *demand* it, and we have no choice to follow. We must attack your lands, and ultimately perish. Utha was the first warden to understand, and offered up her own blood so that I might fashion a Joining for my brethren.”

Solona sharply peered up at the ghoul, then back at the Architect. “You use warden blood for Joinings? Then the other wardens who hadn’t become broodmothers....”

“They died by the time they reached me,” the Architect regretted. “Still, their blood saved many. Where you wardens acquire the taint from darkspawn blood, we acquire your resistance against the Call from yours.”

Sigrun gripped her shortswords tightly. “I don’t see why we’re wasting our time with this darkspawn.”

Velanna threw a hand out. “No, this is what Seranni saw – an ally *amongst* the darkspawn! We cannot pass this up.”

Nathaniel exhaled behind his own drawn bow. “Darkspawn or no, he has a good point. Do we really want to keep killing each other forever?”

Solona’s voice flattened. “That’s what you want? No more blights?”

The Architect confirmed, “We only desire to live alone and in peace.”

Solona turned to Carver. Everyone looked at him, puzzled.

Carver’s lips thinned with Summer Sword unsheathed but lowered in his hands. Solona was leaving the decision to him. “Where are you

from, Architect?”

The spindly darkspawn frowned in confusion. “I was born as I am, an outsider amongst my kind. Why, I do not know. Why do some of your kind possess magic? I have no answers. I only know that the Mother wishes to stop me from freeing darkspawn, and that you seek her demise. Our interests align.”

Carver hesitated at the darkspawn’s confession to amnesia. For once, he didn’t have an answer to their problem.

No, there was no question about it. Face the Mother with the Architect’s help, or let Solona face the brunt of the broodmother’s might.

Carver met Solona’s gaze and nodded.

She lowered her staff, everyone uncertainly following suit. “If this can help end the blights forever, then I can’t reject it. Against the Mother, you have an ally.”

The Architect nodded. “The Mother controls darkspawn yet turned, and through them blocks my presence. However, if you clear enough away, I can directly assist you with my magic.”

The spindly darkspawn glanced at the crystal array on the ground, but didn’t show any signs of recognising their purpose. Regardless, Carver needed the Architect’s magic attuned to the ruins to strengthen his support.

Solona’s lips thinned, then pivoted off.

The white-haired warden determinedly led the party onwards for the deepest level of the ruins, where they encountered younger and younger Children until only grubs accosted them. Flesh began to replace stone. Green mist fogged up their sight, turning scattered darkspawn torches into floating orbs of faint light. Everyone except Solona coughed, wincing with every breath at the stench. Yet, the warden’s heavy breaths echoed clearly.

A large, heavy shadow slithered ahead of them, softly splashing out of sight.

Solona stuttered to a halt. Carver swiftly tossed out an oil bottle he usually reserved for lighting torches, then grabbed a mounted torch and threw it down in front of them. The sudden fire flared through the

mist and darkness, revealing that the ruins' stone carcass ended in a cavern filled with green and black sludge — and there, at the end of their path, was a towering stack of bellies, breasts, and arachnid limbs. A mass of tentacles stretched out like hair, vanishing into the sewage and hugging the slanted stone path with excited twitches. One gigantic tentacle lazily slid over the path to give a clear view of lidless eyes at the top of the flesh pile.

Solona fell to the ground, hyperventilating.

A mouth split open beneath the eyes, and the Mother cackled. “A Grey Warden! Just what I need to kill — along with the rest of your kind! Then maybe the Song will return and I can be free of this silence!”

Leliana dropped to tightly cradle Solona and whisper to her.

Carver stepped between Solona and the Mother, sword drawn. “Architect, now would be nice!”

An apparition of the Architect materialised, stretching both hands out. “I should have never awakened you, Mother, and for that I take responsibility.”

A fireball to end all fireballs instantly combusted, roaring to life in the cavern and throwing everyone's figures into sharp relief. A horrific wail pierced the air. Carver turned away with a wince at the blinding light, feeling the pained cry from the soles of his feet to the roots of his hair. The green mist rolled back in with just as much force, rushing to replace the lost moisture.

Carver shook his head and charged forward, lighting up his sword with a smite.

Trailing embers caught on the Mother's charred, bloated figure, still wriggling with agony — and now, rage. Spittle and blood flew as she bellowed at him. Chunks of burned tentacles scattered the cavern, but more than half were still whole.

A hail of arrows struck a swinging tentacle and knocked it aside.

“Invaders!” the Mother cried out. “All shall die! Fall with your false ally!”

Another burst of blinding light, this time with spiritual damage that stunned the Mother into a splitting migraine.



Carver severed a tentacle that fell over him at the loss of focus.

Sigrun threw a grenade. “What does she mean, ‘false ally?’”

The Mother bodily shook herself back into focus, raging. “You side with the one who started the last blight! Ha! Foolish wardens!”

Solona’s voice cut through the air. “*Architect.*”

The apparition calmly defended himself. “I thought to awaken Urthemiel and end all blights in this manner. Unfortunately, I failed.”

“You——!”

An explosion went off behind Carver, but he couldn’t turn around. When the Mother determinedly attacked Carver and wasn’t hindered by impressive displays of magic, Carver knew Solona had driven the Architect’s apparition away.

A weave of thick plants from Velanna raced in front of Carver and netted the Mother’s tentacles. A splash of venom hissed against them, but it was too late.

Carver leapt up with a yell and cut straight down the broodmother.

Blood and guts burst forth, caking everyone and everything in a layer of grime while the sea of writhing tentacles abruptly stilled and lifelessly sank. Carver unwound an intestine around his neck and threw it aside. At least he had immediately shut his mouth from accidentally ingesting blood. When he turned around, Solona was wrapped around Leliana, shaking like a leaf. Leliana picked her girlfriend up and met gazes with Carver. The rest of the party looked ready to keel over, if not for the fact they would probably end up fainting in the filthiest ruin of all history.

Nathaniel shook blood and slime off of himself and peered at Carver with fearful eyes. “How are you not...?”

Visibly affected?

The story didn’t merit breath.

“It’s over,” Carver didn’t explain, gently patting him on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Carver led the party out of the ruins and into a moonlit wasteland. The dry air smacked against their skin.

Sigrun breathed it in. “The surface smells good.”

Yeah, it really did.

# Charis

## Chapter Notes

Posting a little earlier than usual, hehe

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Carver eyed a window of the office he was in.

The door swung open, revealing Nails.

Carver slumped in his seat behind a desk. “What,” he demanded flatly.

Nails snorted and closed the door behind him. “There are so few of us Shielders left, Postboy. No way am I losing one through the window.”

“I wasn’t thinking of running,” Carver muttered. “Yet.”

A mountain of papers crowded the desk before him, covering possibly every acre of Ferelden that required attention. Cauthrien’s army of secretaries had dumped the madness on him the moment he had returned to Denerim. Queen Anora herself had ordered him to enter Cauthrien’s old office and address the paperwork.

Carver set his quill down and pushed an ink well aside. “The next captain should be resolving these. Or you.”

Nails clicked his teeth. “Postboy, I had to *lead an army* while Teyrn Loghain was gone to Denerim and the king was bedridden. Don’t you dare turn down this promotion. I’m literally here because of you. Besides, I have enough work on my plate.”

Carver held up some papers. “I have recommendations for the next captain—”

Nails pushed his wrist down. “That wasn’t a request, Ser Carver.”

“This is tyranny.”

“*You* gave me the power.”

Carver crumpled up the recommendations and tossed them into a waste bin. His aim was improving.

“You missed the king’s celebration,” Nails remarked, “and his survival

of the Joining. Of course, no one but the Wardens and Teyrn Loghain attended the latter, but Satin says the queen had welcomed her husband home enthusiastically.”

“Of course,” Carver echoed. “After all, one wouldn’t be eager to see Warden Elissa and Faren after horribly flirting with them many months ago.”

“Practically a year ago,” Nails defended. “Cut me some slack, Postboy. I haven’t had the free time to tap anything since my promotion. A man has needs!”

Carver’s lips quirked. “Satin’s sister is always available.”

“To cut my balls off,” Nails muttered. “At least the king and queen are happy.”

Carver tugged at the middle of a paper pile. As a last favour before the final battle, he had asked Morrigan to use blood magic on Anora, who had consumed a pinch of ashes, and restore her fertility. Given Cailan was “early” in his wardenhood comparatively to Fiona, and he was married to an untainted woman, it was possible for the couple to conceive. Where Morrigan had gone after fulfilling her promise, Carver couldn’t say for sure, and that was how they both preferred it.

Wynne, Shale, Sten, Faren, and Oghren were also long-gone. Wynne and Shale had departed for Tevinter to research how to restore Shale to a dwarven body, while Sten had a report for the Antaam in Seheron. Faren and Oghren, meanwhile, had travelled to Knotwood Hills with the Legion of the Dead once they had heard of Kal’Hirol. The former smithing centre of the Empire was too valuable a thaig to abandon, and Orzammar seemed inclined to agree. The kingdom’s warrior caste was going to coordinate with Faren’s party on clearing out a part of the Deep Roads that connected Kal’Hirol to Orzammar, and restore the thaig as a part of the kingdom.

Leliana hadn’t returned to Denerim with Carver, either, instead opting to help Solona lead the wardens in Vigil’s Keep back to Soldier’s Peak. Sigrun and Velanna were following them.

After the events at Amaranthine, Solona had offered Velanna a blank journal and recognised, “You let humans live when you find logic in it.”

The observation had been an olive branch.

Velanna had accepted the journal. The former First was determined to record her people's history – not just old stories, but present memories. Velanna decided that it was time for the Dalish to stop clinging to the ancient past and appreciate the present. She no longer questioned Solona's leadership.

Duncan, Loghain, and most of the Wardens had also already left for Soldier's Peak, including the forces in Ostagar. The Orlesian Order and Orlais' soldiers were likewise headed for the border, bringing with them stories about the Champion of Ostagar and the Hero of Ferelden. According to Duncan, Theron had been curious about Elissa and Alistair's mission under Carver, and was disappointed he couldn't help in the battle at Denerim. Soldier's Peak was going to soon be witness to a memorable reunion between two living legends.

Carver frowned. "Why aren't Warden Elissa and Alistair out of Denerim yet?"

"You can't get rid of the Hero of Ferelden," Nails mocked. "When she and her fellow warden insist that they watch your promotion ceremony, the Crown can hardly complain."

"Who let them believe there would be a ceremony?"

"The Crown."

Carver groaned and left his chair, heading for the door. Might as well hurry and be done with it. "Inform His Majesty and the wardens that I'm ready."

Nails followed him out with a chuckle. "Ferelden is recovering from a bloody *blight*. The soldiers and nobles who *know* you, know you are needed – if you would just stay still for two seconds."

"So you chain me down to Denerim through responsibilities," Carver recognised, much to his chagrin.

Nails patted him on the back. "You're getting it."

The ceremony was a quick affair, attended by few outside those Nails described. The colour had returned to Cailan, last Carver had seen him. The king could rarely be convinced to release his queen's hand from his grip. They were disgustingly affectionate, even as Anora appeared outwardly unperturbed by her husband's behaviour. They resembled a golden retriever and his master. Although, Anora was often the first to hold hands.

While Nails chatted with Satin and Rhiannon and slipped sovereigns between themselves, Elissa, Alistair, Zevran, and Dog approached Carver. The assassin had naturally stolen into the event unnoticed.

"I should have snuck out after you," Zevran referred to the festival.

Carver greeted Dog with a ruffle of his ears. "Trust me, you missed nothing worthwhile."

"I heard about a broodmother," Alistair lowered his voice. "Duncan's keeping the details of Amaranthine quiet, along with Arl Nathaniel, but what I've heard so far has been distressing."

The Grey Wardens had been a private sort even before the blight. It was doubtful that Alistair or even the higher-up wardens in Orlais would be able to hear of much more.

Carver straightened up and grimaced. "All that matters is that it's over. Be gentle with Solona, when you can."

Elissa sighed. "I wish we didn't have to leave."

"You have many Joinings to complete in Soldier's Peak," Carver reminded, "along with an archdemon's carcass to safely store away and gradually destroy. I'm sure Warden Avernus would be ecstatic. The Ferelden Order has much to do."

"How about you, Zevran?" Elissa turned. "You said you were planning to return to Antiva and become a Talon."

Alistair blanched. "Wait, you're serious?"

Zevran smirked. "I might entertain myself on the way there."

Carver crossed his arms. "Don't look at me. I'm grounded." They looked at him. "I'm not a child."

Elissa snorted. "Oh, I know it. Who do you think handheld us through ending the blight? I just have regrets." She gently pulled Carver's collar down to expose a scar on his neck. "If I had been smarter or stronger...."

Carver tugged his collar back up. "I was careless. I could have been more self-aware."

"You could have died," Elissa corrected.

“You didn’t know he would be ambushed with me,” Zevran reminded. “Besides, if you keep at the subject, he’ll sit you down for a discussion.”

Alistair rose a brow. “Is that what he did before the battle at Denerim?”

It had been a short discussion that ran along the same vein as Wynne’s. Zevran and Carver had settled on addressing the original Carver as “Carver,” and someone else as “Carv.” In turn, Carver could call his dear friend “Zev.”

Carver and Zevran shared a small smile.

“I suddenly don’t want to know,” Alistair flipped his tone.

Elissa stretched an arm out for a hug, and Carver stepped into an embrace. “Wardens aren’t supposed to maintain political relationships outside of the Order.”

They parted, and Alistair replaced Elissa. “So tell us the moment you get fired, alright?”

Carver released Alistair and turned to Zevran.

The assassin hugged him. “I know, live for myself and all that.”

“You’ll be a great Talon,” Carver said.

“The deadliest.”

“The deadliest,” Carver agreed. They separated, and Carver crouched down before Dog, running a hand down the mabari’s head. “You’re a good boy, Dog.”

“Borf!”

He stood up, clearing his throat. With a last nod, Carver turned away.

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Ferelden indeed had much to recover from, with the blight’s end. The king’s army was once again reduced to just Ferelden’s standing army while nobles and their manpower returned home to their lands. Soldiers laid down their arms and picked up farming tools. At word of rare materials in Vigil’s Keep – including a fresh dragon egg and the bones of an ancient dragon – the blacksmith Master Wade and his

husband packed up and temporarily moved to Amaranthine, eventually crafting Nathaniel a longsword that sang with power.

Labelled “Vigilance,” the golden blade became Ferelden’s own Summer Sword, and Master Wade rose as his generation’s Vercenne of Halamshiral. Vigilance was a beautiful masterwork whose subtle, draconic iridescence separated it from merely gilded blades. Though Nathaniel tried to pay Wade for the work, the smith accepted only the honour of working with such rare materials, and the sword joined Nathaniel’s bow as heirlooms of the Howe family. Ironically enough, Nathaniel subsequently reached out to Carver for advice on how to wield a longsword, while Carver requested pointers for how to wield a longbow. They exchanged a few letters, then vocal words when the young arl visited Denerim upon Cailan and Anora’s announcement of a new bannorn.

The world itself seemed to stir when the Theirins named Kallian Harthon the bann over Denerim’s alienage and the old Grey Warden compound. The area was now collectively named Adahlan, with Kallian’s heraldry a painted tree to symbolise the vhenadahl. As the first elf to join nobility, Kallian was pleased to move with her husband, father, and cousin into her own property, from which her cousin Shianni also managed the alienage with Hahren Valendrian. Merchants without a guild licence and citizens of low income districts answered to and placed their faith in Kallian, who had once been one of them.

After the event, Nathaniel returned to Amaranthine to reveal the truth about the tragedies in the Pilgrim’s Path. The young arl delivered a moving speech before a gathering of his citizens about human history, Dalish history, and the circle of hatred, humbling all who heard. Even the stiff Bann Esmerelle grudgingly acknowledged the public’s positive mood regarding Nathaniel, and ceased her vocal quibbles over Amaranthine’s redistribution of guards. Outside the arling, nobles’ opinions of the young arl improved.

Carver also slogged through seemingly endless work, attempting to restore the numbers – and with them, the ability – of the king’s army. He oversaw soldiers’ training, assisted with the royal palace’s security, and guided the neverending search for Rendon Howe and his traitorous legion. On top of it all, Carver also worked to restore communication with Gwaren, Ferelden’s most prosperous port that had fallen silent after the Clash at Ostagar. The teyrnir thankfully turned out to have survived the blight due to points Carver had considered in the beginning of the war. With new patrol routes



through the Brecilian Passage, and merchants no longer averse to docking in Ferelden, Carver saw to Gwaren's steady recovery.

The question of a new teyrn, however, remained unsolved. For the moment, the royal family managed Gwaren, leaving Fergus Cousland as Ferelden's only highest-ranking noble.

Gwaren had originally started off as Orzammar's centre of salt trade with the surface, way back when, and now primarily prospered from its abundant fish and timber. When Orzammar restored Kal'Hiroi as a thaig, King Bhelen invited King Cailan over for a banquet. Faren, Oghren, the Legion, and the warrior caste had discovered a record of casteless dwarves who had fought to defend the thaig in the First Blight – a record now immortalised by the Shaperate. Bhelen seized the opportunity to celebrate the deceased casteless' honour, and Orzammar's close economic relationship with Ferelden while he was at it. He used Gwaren as a reminder of the nations' long positive relationship.

For better or worse, Cailan declined the invitation because Anora was discovered pregnant. Delight swept across the nation – partly for the couple, partly at the royal family's new stability.

Carver barely had the time to partake in that celebration, either. Since he was already in the captain's chair, he decided to set up an academic expedition to Frostback Basin. Professor Bram Kenric and his assistant Colette from the University of Orlais spearheaded the quest, motivated by their deduction of historic evidence that Inquisitor Ameridan had spent his last moments in the overgrown wilderness.

While Carver didn't personally attend, he ordered his soldiers to peacefully facilitate communication between the scholars and the Avvar settled in the basin's mountains. So long as the expedition group agreed to stay out of the Stonebears' territory, or sent word ahead that they were cutting through, there would be no trouble. Everyone's patience proved fruitful when Bram and Colette found an altar that Ameridan had created, a monument that Avvar in the Divine Age had carved out of respect to Ameridan and his close allies, and the final resting place of an elven dreamer mage suspected to have been Telana.

The altar proved that Ameridan had revered both the Maker and the Creators. The artefacts in Telana's resting place additionally proved that the formerly dismissed incomplete texts about Ameridan's elven

lover were correct. The monument even placed Telana as Ameridan's wife. Carved inscriptions on all locations pointed to a mage of both passion and faith.

The last nail on the coffin was, apparently, chemically-tested rock and dirt samples that placed these finds at exactly the same time as Ameridan's disappearance. His body was never found, nor was the reason for his death. Regardless, Inquisitor Ameridan, closest friend to Orlais' founding emperor, had undeniably been an *elven mage*.

Bram and Colette's published findings turned the academic community on its head, starting from the renowned University of Orlais. The indisputable facts lead to widespread changes in belief of accepted history, particularly of those who claimed relations with Thedas' last inquisitor. Carver quietly sent a letter via Oriana's family to the Imperial Palace on how to handle Clan Ghilain's demands for reparations from the d'Ameride family, who had profited from their claims.

Briala stepped forward in the political arena as her own person for the first time, convincing the d'Amerides to spare themselves prolonged embarrassment by quietly paying full reparations. It was the beginning of many opportunities Briala seized to develop a status as the negotiator between Orlais' nobility and elven population.

At one point, however, a soldier had to leave his desk.

Thus, Carver turned his gaze northward....

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Another day in the docks, another day paying couriers to run messages between Varric and his contacts. So far as the City Guard knew, Varric sought his *darling* missing brother. What Varric intended

to do upon completion of his search was strictly a family matter.

Regardless, Varric knew he could find an errand boy or girl for a decent price in Kirkwall's docks. The city-state technically allowed its citizens access to all public areas, so the jobless of its citizens often loitered outside the harbormaster's office where a wealthier individual could send them on an errand across the city for coin. These were the unskilled or the unlucky, whose place in marketable society was already filled by someone who had lived in Kirkwall longer or was better at the craft. Ever since the Fifth Blight, most errand boys or girls were Ferelden refugees, sometimes as young as thirteen or as old as seventy. With fresh reputations, they were more trustworthy than longtime dawdlers — and thieves — of the docks, leading to a rise of Kirkwall natives in Darktown.

And a rise in crime.

Which Kirkwall's harbormaster would have none of. Master Liam already suffered enough work, charged as he was with Kirkwall's water channel, lighthouse, the Twins that guarded the channel, Kirkwall's public docks, and the quays meant for transportation between Kirkwall's mainland and the Gallows. When merchants weren't harassing Liam to lower the tolls or cut them in, Templars were overstepping their bounds regarding loose apostates, and guards were clashing with Liam's marine staff in search of smugglers. On top of it all, Liam had to send daily updates to the viscount's office on the Qunari's movements.

Spying on Qunari was easy.

It didn't stop Liam from ageing the three years since their arrival.

Varric respected Liam, he really did. One man and seventy marine staff were in charge of a whole harbour – which happened to equate to the protection of an entire city-state. However, Liam's staff were weak to bribes, up to even Liam's assistant, Aden. If someone with big pockets didn't want errands being ran to their rival's house, they could harass couriers who went there – or, they could pay Aden to dissuade errand boys and girls from taking up jobs for their rival. Such dissuasion usually involved physical harassment. Which was why Varric paid Aden handsomely for keeping *his* errands open. Varric didn't want to chance being outbid by someone in the Merchant's Guild who sought to cull Varric from his information network.

Ergo, being Varric was *expensive*.

Of course, this meant little when House Tethras owned auction houses for commodities from livestock to real estate, had investments in mercenary companies and smithies, ran half a beet plantation in Rivain, and owned the money lending industry. Currency in every sense of the word began and ended with House Tethras – or, just Varric, now that Bartrand had vanished with the wind. Varric's brother had already owned the most prominent seat in the Merchant's Guild before the expedition to the Deep Roads; indeed, that expedition was originally going to be the final means to break House Tethras free from the guild and function as its own independent conglomerate. Now, Varric kept his guild seat merely out of acknowledgement that he didn't share Bartrand's gift or interest in business beyond the strictly necessary.

Which meant that while Liam tried to prevent crime in his office, Aden harassed refugees outside his office, and Varric only knew to throw money at the situation.

When Aden itched for more coin, he would also spend time in the office's antechamber filtering errand requests from colourful characters or new faces he might be able to bribe. Varric joined the short line in the antechamber to send money along a courier to one of his contacts, check on the status of his search for Bartrand. Remind his contact why they were helping him. Varric wasn't on Aden's colourful list, but he had to regularly pass his bribes to Aden once a month. Today was the day Varric would have to wait in line.

A line that had slowed to a stop.

Varric glanced towards the front. Aden was engaged with a figure in a set of plate armour that had evidently been smithed in one batch, rather than assembled through different pieces over time. The worn-down ensemble lacked crests or layered cloth typical in uniforms such as the City Guard's or the Templars'. However, it also lacked eclectic touches found in self-made mercenaries like Garrett's red butt-cape or Anders' feathers. The self-discipline in the figure's posture firmly dissuaded any impression of a thug.

Aden's sour expression quickly explained the odd visual: Ferelden.

A country too modern to lack independence, yet too primitive to be considered a world power. Ferelden's standing military, the king's army, couldn't afford to issue unique armour except when it came to small-enough units, like the lauded Maric's Shield. Aveline herself had arrived at Kirkwall in no more than a tunic and studded leather to

show for her contribution to the king's army. Then again, Aveline had been serving under one lord, before King Cailan had called all his countrymen to arms under the expanded "king's army."

Varric peered at the person near Aden again. Armour by Ferelden smiths hardly complemented one's figure, but *did* serve their purpose — better, in fact, than their appearance would suggest. As a result, Ferelden's soldiers usually ended up all looking the same regardless of gender. Varric didn't personally have the experience to speak of Ferelden with such familiarity, but given recent world events, it was hard for anyone to not have heard details of the country by now. Kirkwall's abundance of Ferelden refugees shared facts about their homeland often. And loudly.

The stranger in line was easily tall for a human male, and could probably see over Aden's head if they wanted to. Counter to Kirkwall's customs, the stranger was wearing a helmet indoors; from what Varric could see of the person's failing conversation with Aden, the stranger's hand also tended to rest on the pommel of a sheathed greatsword. They were either rightly wary of Kirkwall's residents, or unaware of the paranoid habit. Regardless, the stranger was visibly invested in convincing Aden to grant them access to couriers.

Finally, the stranger side-stepped the line to wait for Aden's lunch break, conscious of stalling the line but determined to achieve their goal. If Varric wasn't sure already, the stranger was definitely a new face to Kirkwall's docks. Regulars already knew that they could skip past Aden to hire a courier, so long as Aden didn't catch them.

Varric reached the front of the line and eyed the armoured stranger standing aside, waiting. "You have yourself a barnacle, Harbour Assistant."

Aden shrugged. "A miserly one. Next!"

The stranger straightened up in alarm when Varric handed Aden a hefty bag of coins and strolled for the antechamber's door. Varric didn't fear bribing people in broad daylight. The sight of Bianca usually discouraged wild ideas.

Varric did smirk at the armoured stranger as he left.

Sure enough, the Ferelden followed him out. "Were those... *sovereigns*?"

Synonymous with gold, the largest unit of monetary measurement

above copper, then silver.

“You’re on this side of the docks,” Varric commented, “which means you’ve been granted entry into the crowded city that is Kirkwall. If you aren’t smart, you’re only going to lose more money from here.”

Sea voyages were costly. Based on the stranger’s hesitance to pay Aden the “courier fee,” they must have already spent half their money moving from the ship to the docks like any other refugee. Unfortunately, most of Kirkwall’s current job openings involving muscle were of the risky, criminal variety.

However, the Bone Pit was always in need of miners, and Garrett had a fifty-fifty stake in it. The Ferelden labourers could always use an able-bodied fighter among them.

The stranger shook their head in disbelief before Varric could mention the pit. “Kirkwall uses Ferelden sovereigns as currency? I suppose given the prevalence of dwarven trade through the Merchant’s Guild.... No, I’m making assumptions.”

Varric stalled. “You’re familiar with the Merchant’s Guild?”

The stranger stopped alongside him, wary of his tonal shift. “They invented wheelchairs, didn’t they?”

Varric subtly eyed the busy crowd of errand boys and girls, marine staff, and dockworkers outside the harbourmaster’s office where they stood. The ambient noise easily swallowed Varric’s conversation from curious ears. He could probably drop someone and walk off without being noticed.

“Don’t let them hear you say that,” Varric snorted, outwardly friendly. “Every family has a stake in placing themselves ahead of the rest, and claiming patents is the best way to do it. Generalising a product’s inventor risks insulting the real one.”

The stranger didn’t display familiarity with Varric’s words, but the Guild never hired merely anyone, even for an errand. The stranger’s blank body language forced Varric to concede that he needed to read their face to be certain.

“I’m Varric Tethras,” Varric shared with a smile. “Everyone’s favourite merchant dwarf born and raised in Kirkwall.”

The stranger nodded. “Ser Charis, of the king’s army.”

No last name, then. No interest in Varric's socio-economic standing, either.

Varric would also be very impressed if the Merchant's Guild bothered to hire an active Ferelden soldier from across the sea just to reach Varric. Some guild members were playing a game of risk where at any moment, the Tethras with a seat could change from Varric to his cunning brother. A tentative question floated around concerning which brother would be most lucrative to back. It was likely that Ser Charis' stiff, wary posture simply sourced from the same soldier handbook that mandated Charis' regulation-tight and polished armour.

Better safe than sorry, though. Bartrand's trail had been last scented in Rivain where Varric couldn't penetrate the information web there, but Varric wouldn't put it past his brother to then unexpectedly hide in Ferelden and manipulate its soldiers.

Varric chuckled. "Oho, a *knighted* soldier? Any chance you've come to whisk the Fereldens back home?"

The title of "ser" referred to Ferelden soldiers above a certain rank, though as Varric understood it, the rule excluded some sergeants and all non-knighted commoners. Charis' lack of correction confirmed that the Ferelden was indeed knighted.

Charis hesitantly intoned, "There is a process in place for those who wish to return."

Varric recognised the speech patterns of the overworked and underpaid. "Hey, excessive workplace demands exist in every country. No one can blame you. I can see you're just obviously not from around here."

Charis self-consciously touched his helmet. "Is this uncommon?"

Varric encouragingly hummed. "Sure, the guardsmen and Templars are a mix of those with and without helmets in casual settings. If you speak to people without the helmet, though, I assure you that you'll have an easier time getting others to warm up to you."

Charis' tone turned uncertain. "So if I'm not a Templar or a guard, then I would conversely stand out."

Varric didn't refute the interpretation.

Charis surprised Varric by – hesitantly – removing his helmet.

The sight underneath shocked Varric into a bark of laughter. “Bloody ashes, if you just apologise to that assistant, he doesn’t stand a chance!”

Charis blinked. “What?”

“Aden has a weakness for pretty boys.” Varric watched the soldier’s expression. “...What, no one’s called you pretty before?”

Charis sharply exhaled, both relieved and flustered. “N-Not to my face.”

Heavy, dark brows; a comma hairstyle; and bright blue eyes seen in pure-blood Marchers. Families were known to mix around the Waking Sea, leading to grey or cornflower blue eyes in coastal ports like Denerim. It was striking to see pure Marcher blue in another’s gaze. Combined with a tall, lean physique and his reticent nature, Charis could easily be the fifth son of a noble gone to join the king’s army. He was also around the age that most of such soldiers received a knighthood.

“Where are you headed?” Varric jovially asked. “I can give you a quick tour of the city.”

“No need.” Charis shifted, his hand on his pommel. It was always resting there. “Though I appreciate the offer. Farewell, serah.”

Varric watched the textbook soldier quickly vanish into the crowd, before he pulled aside an errand boy and dropped coins in his hands.

“Follow him.”

## Chapter End Notes

Since Act 2 starts three years after Act 1, Carver is now 21 years old. Still on the young side for a knight, but not unusual. Garrett is 28.

For reference, the events of DAO and Awakening all occurred within twelve months, from 5:30 to early 5:31. DA2’s Act 2 starts in 5:34.

Also, even though it’s custom to address people by their surnames outside Ferelden, I’m having Varric *mentally* refer to Hawke by his



first name. I think it sounds more natural than Varric referring to everyone by their surname if they have any, like Aveline Hendyr née Vallen.

# Ferelden

## Chapter Notes

Just a quick note: As with the Wardens, I'm capitalising Qunari in reference to the group/society, and lowercasing qunari in reference to the individuals — or at least, according to how Varric would.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Varric swirled his beer stein as he watched a couple errand boys and girls talk and eat at the same time. When they were on the elderly side, Varric made sure to order porridge. He knew his coins went straight to their children and grandchildren's mouths. The errand boys and girls were also more comfortable reporting the fruits of their menial work when Varric sat them down in his suite in the Hanged Man, where they could pretend they had a job and were merely sharing a meal with their boss.

"Sundermount?" Varric repeated.

An errand boy nodded as he scooped up porridge with a piece of bread. "To the Dalish clan settled there, even. I didn't tread closer for fear of their hunters, but the soldier walked in and out of their camp without a fuss. When he returned to the Gallows, he gave the herbalist peddler a bottle of vallaslin ink."

Varric's brows rose. "Does he still have both eyes?"

The errand boy shook his head in disbelief. "The Dalish didn't fire a single arrow at him. They wouldn't have had a hard time aiming, considering he had gone without a helmet."

Varric groaned into his drink. Charis had taken Varric's advice to heart. Even in the unlikely possibility that the soldier was Bartrand's spy, Varric felt sorry.

"Last night, he stole cargo from the Coterie," an errand girl reported. "Or, they were stealing the cargo, but the soldier killed them before they could run away with it. Silks and such meant for nobles in Orzammar. The soldier let the courier keep the goods; told the boy to take his little sisters and run to Tantervale's farmlands, find honest work."

Varric maintained outward passive interest, though the last detail caught his ear. “Boy?”

“Eighteen or so,” the errand girl confirmed. “He’s a farmer’s kid named Pryce, lost his parents to the blight four years ago and has been passing for an adult ever since. He mainly ran errands for Athenril. Now she’s paying several errand boys and girls to learn the soldier’s schedule.”

No doubt to organise an accident.

Athenril headed a relatively ethical smuggling ring that Garrett could have easily worked for if he hadn’t joined the Red Iron mercenaries by chance instead. The mercenaries that House Tethras were invested in mainly watched out for Tethras businesses or properties when they could, but they weren’t dedicated protection. So when Garrett had impressed Varric as a former Red Iron, Varric’s interest had piqued. Good thing he hadn’t sent them a single coin. It wasn’t until recently Garrett had learned that, in an attempt to enter the political sphere, his former group had started accepting hits against pro-Ferelden nobles in Kirkwall. Garrett had ended it as he did most his problems — with wisecracking and blood.

Regardless, Athenril was evidently seeking retribution for her doubly stolen goods. Varric found himself debating if he should warn Charis about the danger.

The last errand boy piped up as he wiped his bowl with bread. “Nothing as exciting on my end. The soldier made his monthly visit to the Hightown market, purchased feminine products, and returned to the tavern near the docks he’s staying in.”

Varric resisted the urge to pinch his nose bridge. He was the smooth, charismatic storyteller who slyly slipped out of danger to tell the tale. Untangling the living, knotted snake that was anything *Bartrand* did not stump or fluster him. Yet for reasons Varric had yet to divine, Charis had spent the past few months collecting herbalist materials, tripping over crime, and building up a reputation as the door to knock on when one needed feminine products for free. Charis wore a helmet outdoors when he could help it, but if he was trying to woo the female Antivan merchant who visited Kirkwall every month by purchasing her goods, the soldier would see more success by exposing his face. Howsoever Charis might intend to communicate with Bartrand in Ferelden, he had evidently given up on trusting Kirkwall’s couriers and instead spent his efforts confusing Varric.

Digging up Charis' records also proved difficult for a dwarf without contacts in Ferelden. Varric had sent quite a bit of coin across the Waking Sea. The ship with Varric's answers had finally arrived only recently, confirming that a Ser Charis indeed existed in the king's army and had been working for it for the past ten years — the soldier was older than he looked. Just before the blight, Charis had been demoted to a permanent desk position due to an unnamed blunder. Among Charis' scarce acquaintances of note was a Sergeant Kylar whom few in the king's army apparently had a high opinion of. Kylar had also been reassigned at the time of Charis' demotion due to "unprofessional conduct."

If the king's army had sanctioned Charis' visit to Kirkwall, the fact hadn't reached Varric. For now, he had to contend with the uncertainty of whom Bartrand would be willing to hire if desperate enough. Varric hadn't exactly made it easy for his brother to pop up long enough to profit from his expedition gains.

Varric's door suddenly erupted with rapid knocking, to which an errand boy stood up from his clean bowl and allowed an errand girl in.

The woman panted. "Your soldier's in jail."

Varric chuckled in excitement and slowly stood up, his couriers rising as well and departing. Varric handed coins to each of them and strolled out of his suite for the city jail.

He arrived to an irate jailor and two men behind bars.

Guardsmen Nabil threw his hands up. "What now!?"

In one cell was Charis, and in the next was a roughed-up young man in subtly luxurious doublet and pants. The two men were both slumped against the wall exhausted, if petulant.

Varric held his hands up placatingly. "I'm just here to sightsee why a Ferelden soldier and a noble would be arrested."

"Noise complaint," Charis muttered.

"Physical assault in the du Puis estate," Nabil stated. "Blighted Ferelden had stolen into a Hightown property and beaten up Comte du Puis."

"He abducted a woman," Charis defended, "and he's related to a serial

killer stalking Kirkwall's sewers."

Nabil scoffed. "How do you know that?"

"He spoke Orlesian."

"*Fereldens*," Nabil cursed. "At the same time — from what Orlesian I could decipher — you, Comte du Puis, kidnapped a noblewoman for her *protection*? Against what, the sewer monster?"

"A blood mage," Charis and du Puis answered at the same time.

Charis muttered in du Puis' direction. "I'm still killing you after this."

Du Puis responded in Orlesian. Apparently, the nobleman had spoken the few words he knew in Common.

"You see?" Charis pointed. "For Andraste's sake, summon a translator down here and release me from this cell."

"You *just* declared premeditated murder," Nabil spluttered. "The only reason you're both allowed bail is because: one, the noblewoman isn't pressing charges and merely wishes to be left alone with her family, and two, you're raving mad. As someone who doesn't wish to spend his working hours listening to you jokers argue, I'm willing to blame the bottle."

Charis frowned. "I'm not *drunk* — don't touch that."

Nabil leaned off his desk where the soldier and nobleman's possessions lay, including a sheathed greatsword. The guard snorted. "Did Daddy pay for the gilded hilt? If the dwarf pawns it off for you, these cells can be a memory."

"Not a chance," Charis firmly rejected.

"You know," Varric cut in, "Knight-Lieutenant Emeric seems to believe that a Gascard du Puis is responsible for the disappearance of several women over the years."

"I know the Templar you speak of," Nabil snorted. "The old man harasses the Guard and his own Order to break into noble houses and trudge through sewers over a pouch of bones. Knight-Lieutenant Emeric has long passed his years of useful contribution."

Aveline had said the same last Varric had seen her, though more tactfully. There was no monetary profit in entertaining the illusion

that Emeric, Charis, and Gascard were all sharing according to their wild imaginations, but Varric scented a chance at information.

Varric covertly passed Nabil a few coins. “I’ll take Ser Charis off of you.”

Both Nabil and Charis straightened up in shock before the guard freed Charis from his cell. The soldier hesitantly followed Varric out of the jail, hastily reequipping his belongings to himself along the way.

Charis stopped once they reached the outdoors and dug into his coin purse. “Allow me to pay you back——”

“You can try,” Varric allowed. “However, I predict absence from the army without leave costs more than that purse can contain, Ser Charis. Unless you’re eager to tour Ferelden’s jail cells.”

Charis stiffened.

“Maybe it won’t be that bad,” Varric turned around to stroll away. “Maybe the king’s army will only court martial you when they find out——”

“Are you...*blackmailing* me?” Charis spoke, more caught off-guard by the idea than Varric’s words. “What have I to offer that is worth the effort?”

Hm. Maybe the knight hadn’t illegally abandoned his post. Still....

Varric turned to look at him. “You speak Orlesian?”

“I understand some of it,” Charis corrected. “Don’t you?”

Varric interpreted the more traditional of Kirkwall’s nobles for Garrett when necessary, and Varric possessed enough conversational skills himself. However, he preferred not to advertise his fluency when weaving tales in the Hanged Man or writing his novels, instead implying that his characters always only spoke Common to each other unless the plot demanded otherwise. Stories ran smoother that way.

Only those close to Varric in life or business knew of his fluency in Orlesian. Like Bartrand.

“Maybe,” Varric vaguely dismissed. “At this point regardless, don’t you agree that I essentially own you?”

Charis hesitated.

Varric watched him. Whatever circumstances that had brought Charis to Kirkwall, the soldier obviously valued moral rightness and went out of his way to help people, if too straightforwardly. Not all guards under Aveline appreciated the textbook manner with which Charis conducted himself. In a truly desperate situation, Varric himself would have broken into someone's home to rescue an abducted woman. He wouldn't have fallen for the gossip Emeric had been spreading for the past three years, though.

Charis' face twisted. "How much was the bail?"

Varric told him.

A regretful sigh answered the fact. "It would be suspicious if I suddenly summoned the money, wouldn't it."

Varric smirked. "You thinking of stealing from criminals?" See: Athenril and the Coterie.

Charis paused. "...No."

"Too bad." Varric clapped Charis' back and ambled ahead of him. "You're going to start doing so for me, Shiny."

"Shiny?"

"You always keep your armour polished. Would you prefer Square?"

"...I don't mind being Shiny."

X

Having a soldier in debt to oneself proved *great*. Varric could send Charis on menial errands when Varric didn't want the soldier to possibly tail him while he went out with Garrett, or when Varric merely didn't want to pay for an errand boy. Charis was also too straight-laced to use Varric's grocery money for himself, always returning with Varric's orders and the change. Varric could even barge into Charis' tavern room any time of day – or night.

The soldier maintained quite a sparse living space. Besides a box of feminine products, Varric managed to spot or secretly dig up a bow, a quiver of arrows, weapon cleaning tools, pieces of blank parchment, a wax stick, a candle, an ink bottle, several quills, and one extra pair of clothing. Charis evidently leaned towards black turtlenecks. If Charis owned incriminating evidence of a connection with Bartrand, the

soldier had to be carrying it around with him everywhere, or slept with it in hand. The one time Varric had visited him unannounced at night, Charis had drawn a dagger from under his pillow, shifting a coin purse and a stack of papers bound by twine into view.

The only route towards those papers was earning Charis' trust.

Varric made sure to knock before breaking in since then.

Convincing the soldier to talk about himself, however, proved as difficult as pulling someone's teeth. Even now, when Varric had invited Charis to the Hanged Man to help him keep an eye out for someone, the soldier preferred to stand at attention while Varric sat, sipping ale and shuffling cards.

Varric minutely raised his voice without looking away from his cards. "See Gallard, yet?"

Charis shook his head. Not one to overly express himself, this soldier. He at least wasn't wearing his helmet indoors this time, given the fifty-fifty chance otherwise. Deciphering Charis' inner thoughts from the minuscule furrow of his brows challenged Varric the same way a blank canvas did many artists. The countless possibilities Varric could find in Charis' empty body language paradoxically made Varric's mind go blank.

He had no idea what Charis was thinking, except from one moment to another.

Charis was a living page-turner.

"Please stop," Charis murmured.

Varric blinked innocently.

"You're staring." Charis pointedly didn't tear his eyes away from the tavern door. "I would rather not be fodder for your stories. I understand you're a published author."

"You overestimate yourself," Varric chuckled, covertly returning his eyes to his cards. "I don't write literature about just anyone. Still, paint won't dry faster if you stare at it." Varric gestured to the chair across him. "Why not play a round of Wicked Grace with me? You'll love it, Shiny, it has a lot of rules."

Charis stared at the spot, hand resting on his pommel. "If a fight



suddenly breaks out, I'm better served standing."

"Come on," Varric urged, dealing cards. "This is the Hanged Man. Patrons do desperate, crazy, or embarrassing things here that they won't remember the next day all the time. A fight is *sure* to break out."

Charis froze just as he sat down. "I knew it; I'm not meant to be here."

Varric picked up his card hand. "You saying you're allergic to violence? Serpents are higher than Songs."

Charis coughed. "I would rather not fight if I can help it. What suit is higher than Serpents?"

"Knights." Varric belatedly spluttered at Charis' remark. "Wait, don't tell me you've never drawn your sword. She seems like a beauty! Where did you get her?"

Charis hastily picked up his card hand. "...I've just been kicked out of a tavern before, and I'm not eager to repeat the experience. I received my sword from my cousin. What do I do with matching suits?"

Isabela's arrival at their table interrupted Varric's response. The raider slumped into a chair. "Ooo Wicked Grace? Count me in."

Varric noted Charis' reflexive twitch to escape. "Be gentle this round, Rivaini. I'm teaching the game to a soldier who has been kicked out of a tavern before."

"A common story," Charis muttered.

Varric snorted. "Not with you, Shiny. Keep as many matching suits as you can; once someone draws the Death card, the game ends and all players must show their hand."

"Death," Charis echoed, "not Joker?"

Isabela's lips stretched as she watched them. "I bet three copper."

"Call," Varric followed.

Charis shifted in his seat, flustered. "I don't wish to gamble money."

"Let's just talk, then," Varric casually suggested. Jackpot. "Your tavern story sounds like it's worth three copper."

“I drank a lot and got caught in a bar fight.” Charis placed a Serpent down and drew another card, triggering the second turn. He kicked a brow up. “For three copper, I’ll tell that much.”

Varric unwittingly smiled as he imitated Charis. “The player with the most matching suits by the game’s end, wins.”

Isabela didn’t replace a card in her hand, either confident in her cards or just stirring up mischief. “Check. For three copper about myself, I’ll admit I’m a raider.”

Varric relaxed in his seat. “Raise. I have a seat in the Merchant’s Guild.”

“You’re a raider?” Charis asked Isabela, not reacting to the bait. “Where’s your ship? Call; it was a dwarf-run tavern.”

“Call,” Isabela replied. “It sank.”

Everyone replaced a card, and Isabela passed on raising the bet.

Varric continued. “Raise. My seat was formerly my brother’s until he left me for dead in the Deep Roads and fled Kirkwall.”

Charis frowned at his cards. “Call. The ones who started the bar fight were dwarves.”

“That’s not worth the raise,” Isabela tutted. “Give us something juicier!”

“I’m not sure the full story merits the raise,” Charis shared, hand briefly twitching around his cards.

“Then throw in another story,” Varric offered.

Charis sighed. “No, I don’t think I will. The tavern was in the Common District of Orzammar.”

Isabel and Varric simultaneously choked on air.

“That’s a raise,” Isabela deadpanned. “Uh – my luck went down starting when an Antivan smuggling ring fired at me for transporting slaves. I didn’t know at the time, until I finally evaded cannonfire long enough to check the cargo I was paid to move. They’re free now.”

Varric maintained his loose expression while his mind raced. Bartrand had a strong obsession with Orzammar. Andraste’s knickers, Varric

couldn't fold *now*. "Call; my brother betrayed me over an idol made out of *red* lyrium."

Varric's stories didn't seem to be fazing Charis. They played through another turn of replacing cards in their hands and no one raising the bet.

Isabela squirmed. "Now I *have* to know. Raise – to make up for the failed slave delivery, an Antivan merchant sent me after an old artefact in Orlais. I lost it with my ship while trying to leave the Waking Sea."

Varric smothered a wince with a swig of his ale. "Call. My brother is Bartrand Tethras."

"I don't think that's worth the raise," Charis chided. "I already knew your surname beforehand. Tell me, what do you do with Garrett Hawke?"

Varric tightly gripped his casual air. "The usual: chase profits, knock heads. Well, to match the raise, I can say that we've fought dragonlings and a dragon before. What were you doing in Orzammar?"

Charis subtly frowned in disappointment. "Death."

The soldier laid his hand down, revealing the Death card.

Varric and Isabela followed, clicking their teeth at Charis' better hand.

"You...cheated," Isabela remarked. "You're supposed to reveal Death once you draw it!"

Charis leaned back in his seat and carded a hand through his hair in relief. "You've both been cheating from the start. And I do believe you two owe me a story worth all the ones we've shared so far."

"Beginner's luck," Isabela muttered, washing away her defeat with ale, before she launched into a tale of how she had first met Garrett.

By the end of it, everyone was chuckling, or at least Charis' facial muscles were relaxed. Varric followed up with a full description of the Deep Roads expedition, though he kept his tone light to match the atmosphere. Charis thanked them both before perking up in the direction of the door. Gallard had arrived.

“Great!” Varric waved the man over. “Now we can play a round with real coin!”

“*That’s* what you needed him for?” Charis stood up for the lavatories. “I’ll fold out of the game early, seeing as I’m here to earn money. Shout if you need protection.”

“You’ll hear shouting,” Varric snorted with a gesture to Bianca.

Isabela leaned over while they passed cards around. “I have to know; what’s the story there?”

“He may or not be Bartrand’s spy,” Varric replied coolly.

“So you’re keeping him close?” Isabela cooed. “Do you need me to extract information from him?”

Varric chuckled. “No one’s asking you to seduce him, Rivaini. Now you, Gallard, what do you make of him?”

Isabela hummed teasingly. “He’s easy on the eyes.”

Gallard snorted as he picked up his hand. “I’m just a bagman, Tethras. It’s not my place to say — even if your human did merk a crew of ours over some goods the other day.”

“Ah,” Varric baited, “but as an accountant, money is your concern.”

“The *Coterie* is my concern.” Gallard started the bids off with silver. “You’re all friends of Hawke. You should note that the Bone Pit has recently begun suffering cargo raids without a clear perpetrator.”

Varric watched Gallard rub a notch in his elven ear earned from a knife fight in Darktown years ago. It was a nervous or irritated tell. The thefts were costing Hubert Bartiere, Garrett’s business partner, his cuts to the *Coterie* — and were costing bodies, given the *Coterie* directly invested in the cargo’s protection. While Garrett funded and profited from other businesses, he relied on the mines for steady income. On either side of the law, no one was happy.

Varric clicked his teeth. “How long has this been happening?”

“Long enough,” Gallard deadpanned. “Blood will start spilling. Given Hawke’s attachment to his Ferelden labourers, I suggest he clears them of guilt before we do.”

“What of your own people?”

The table jerked, noticing Charis had returned.

The soldier sat down, choosing to watch the game instead of play it. “I’ve been blind before to crimes committed by my fellow soldiers. It is difficult but ethical to consider them.”

“The Coterie isn’t a military unit,” Gallard drawled.

“No,” Charis agreed. “But you run like clockwork—— a tightly-run ship. How else could you have usurped the Sabrathan during their civil war? That criminal empire had been around since the Imperium.”

Gallard eyed Charis, the line of his shoulders relaxed. “An internal culprit, you say? It’s worth considering.”

“You’re not angry about the Orzammar goods, I hope,” Charis added.

“As I’ve said before,” Gallard dismissed, “I’m just a bagman. What I can tell you is the current pool for when Athenril will whack you.”

“Do you have a stake in it?” Charis asked.

Gallard’s lips curled. “At the end of the day, I always collect.”

Isabela pouted. “You’re keeping the rest of us out of something. Quickly, dwarf — let’s make them jealous.”

“I have Bianca,” Varric automatically teased.

He could question Gallard about the Coterie’s full opinion of Charis later, when Varric could privately remind him why the thieves’ guild avoided targeting Varric’s businesses. In their language, Varric was a “pagan,” someone who moved between gangs or had no affiliation. He was an irreplaceable resource, which also meant he knew details about gangs that they wouldn’t want their competition to know.

“I must admit,” Gallard said as the card game continued, “I didn’t expect a soldier like you to loiter on this side of the law.”

“I’m not breaking any rules,” Charis dismissed. “I’m also fulfilling a debt.”

“To Tethras?” Isabela giggled. “Then I can ask: why the obsession with sewers? I know several raiders upset with your interference in their lyrium smuggling.”

Charis shook his head. “I was just passing through. The Carta and

their hired help jumped me first.”

Isabela tossed out a few coins, eyeing her cards. “I never mentioned any dwarves.”

“They’re averse to sea travel,” Charis stated. “If they want to transport goods, they have to outsource. Anyway, as I said, I was just cutting through. If a serial killer is preying on Kirkwall, I must apprehend him.”

“Here we go again,” Varric commented.

“Knight-Lieutenant Emeric found a literal pouch of hand bones while following the murderer’s trail,” Charis pointed out. “If scholars can date rock and dirt samples in the Frostback Basin, then a couple of guards should be able to perform forensics.”

Everyone blinked. “Frostback Basin?”

“A remote corner of Ferelden,” Charis muttered. “Then again, said scholars *were* from the University of Orlais.”

Empress Celene had developed the university into *the* most respected learning institution. The university could thus be considered academically ahead of the rest of southern Thedas. Still, Charis proved more knowledgeable than Varric expected. Perhaps Ferelden wasn’t as backwater as the rest of the world thought — or at least, its nobles weren’t. Charis seemed more and more like a noble’s third child than fifth. Varric also hadn’t heard of Ferelden involvement in archeology, though Varric admittedly had little incentive in keeping up with the academic world.

Gallard’s brows twitched up in interest. “How would you suggest they perform forensics with a couple of old bones?”

Charis was visibly invested in the topic. “Knight-Lieutenant Emeric could petition the Circle to allow its mages to date the hand bones for the time of death. If the date lines up with Lady Ninette’s disappearance, then the Knight-Lieutenant deserves official support in his investigation.”

“You speak of alchemy and magic,” Gallard noted. No doubt the gangster already had ideas on how to protect the Coterie from being associated with future crimes.

“The Templar bothers Hawke enough these days,” Isabela remarked to

Varric. “There can’t be any harm forwarding this suggestion to the old man.”

No, there wasn’t.

“You’ve given me much to consider,” Gallard sighed, revealing his hand and the Death card. “I owe you this, Tethras: on the twelfth month of Gamlen Amell failing to pay back his loans, I withheld all packages and mail for his house except for one letter warning him to pay up soon. As he has recently begun honouring his debts, you may now send Hawke to collect his uncle’s mail for him. Or not, I don’t care. The mail is with Harbour Assistant Aden.”

“That was three years ago,” Varric recognised the month, “when Hawke had just returned from the expedition. Maker’s breath, Gallard, you’re telling me now?”

Garrett didn’t deserve to run errands for his uncle anymore. Besides, Varric had been meaning to visit Aden, considering his recent treatment of even Varric’s couriers. The assistant was developing a personal taste for delivering physical abuse.

Varric sighed at Gallard’s unruffled blink. “Shiny and I will check it out,” Varric decided.

Gamlen’s mail was likely harmless, and Varric could use the opportunity to gauge Charis’ motivations. Varric had learned quite a bit about the peculiar soldier.

Including his tell.

## Chapter End Notes

I plan to eventually involve all DA2 companions in this DA2 arc, so for now bear with me. Thank you so much for the positive reviews, it really motivates me to keep writing!

# Chimney

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Charis knocked on the door to the harbourmaster's office.

Varric spluttered. "Are you serious?"

Charis crossed his arms. "Last time I broke into someone's place, I ended up arrested."

Aden opened the door with a huff. "Harbourmaster's busy, what do—"

Varric shot him in the shoulder.

Aden flew back, pinned to a wall. "Blood and ashes!"

Varric pointed Bianca up at his chin. "No, *yours*, if you continue beating up the errand boys and girls. If you're feeling lonely, Aden, just say so. Bianca's always looking for company."

Aden grit his teeth. "If not me, then someone else!"

Charis was catching Aden's wrist before Varric realised the assistant had aimed to cut Varric's face with a dagger. Varric blinked rapidly.

"Where's the mail," Charis asked. When Aden spat at him, Charis quietly squeezed and jerked the man's wrist. Hard.

The dock's ambient noise smothered the crack of Aden's wrist. His dagger clattered to the ground.

"Aden," Charis spoke softly, "best to answer while you still have bones left."

The assistant cursed, pointing. "Loose...plank...."

Varric pried the cache open while Charis kicked the dagger away. Varric whistled. "You've been entrepreneurial."

Aden hissed at the pain. Or at the sight of Varric requisitioning Aden's unethical gains, along with Gamlen Amell's mail.

Varric strolled out, pouches full. "Come along, Shiny."



Aden cursed at their retreating figures. “Blighted dwarf and his Ferelden dog!”

Varric turned the corner and spotted errand boys and girls the worse for wear. He handed them half of Aden’s money and Gamlen’s packages, then told them to deliver the mail. Varric would later find a way for the rest of Aden’s money to reach the other errand boys and girls.

Charis followed Varric out of the docks. “The harbourmaster should fire him.”

Varric snorted. “Despite Aden’s attitude, he’s good at his job. Besides, he now knows the rules.”

A harsh, heavy voice hit them from behind. “You – this is all your fault! You and that blighter, Garrett Hawke!”

They spun around to see a curly, white-haired dwarf racing after them, an elven woman briskly keeping up.

Varric innocently placed a hand on his chest. “What did *I* do?”

“My sons are lost in the Deep Roads because of your stories,” the elder animatedly accused, “gone to chase after gold and glory – and no one but you and Hawke know where they might have gone!”

The elven woman caught up and sighed shallowly. “Your boys are grown men, Messere Yevhen. If anyone led them astray, it’s the middle child.”

Yevhen jabbed a finger at her, his braided beard shaking. “If you want to keep your job, woman, then shut your mouth!”

“Messere,” Varric pleasantly cut in, “your boys barely sound bright enough to follow a map. Maker knows they haven’t wandered far.”

Yevhen, no last name, but he wore his finery like a uniform. Even while throwing accusations, the old man held his back straight and his head high with a pointed distance from Charis, like commoners were contagious. Varric was being accosted by an affiliate of the Merchant’s Guild who obviously hoped their wealth and status would rub off on him by proximity. Whatever the Guild could be saying behind Varric’s back, it wasn’t discouraging Yevhen from boldly accusing Varric of being a good storyteller.

No amount of coin could persuade someone to return Yevhen's sons to the surface, and Varric didn't want to risk implying that whatever riches that lied in the Deep Roads were worth the venture. The task had to fall into good hands.

Varric tracked Charis in the corner of his eye while he placatingly smiled. "Watch the paths to Sundermount. I'm sure your boys will turn up soon."

Charis bodily jerked at Varric's dismissive turn. "...I'll find your sons, serah."

Yevhen blustered. "Messere to you!"

"We appreciate it," the elven woman replied.

Varric hid a smirk while Charis hesitantly strolled up to him. Before the soldier could open his mouth, Varric drawled, "Our path is down the Deep Roads. Will you be alright?"

Charis subtly loosened up. "I once followed someone into the Deep Roads with only a knife."

Varric didn't bother hiding his smile. "You know, Shiny, sometimes I don't believe half of what you say."

Charis quipped, "Only half?"

Varric knew better than to risk his life in the Deep Roads without a form of insurance, so he invited someone to watch his back while rescuing Yevhen's children. As the group of three descended through a publically-known entrance into the Deep Roads, Varric watched the party's rear, conveniently placing Charis at the very front where Bianca could track him, just in case. Varric voiced directions when necessary.

Meanwhile, Isabela shadowed Charis' side, granting Varric a clear view and allowing her to pick apart their local minion. The raider was starting to have fun with the suspense of Varric's situation.

"You know, Charis," Isabela commented, "I happen to know another Ferelden soldier."

Charis glanced at her. "Really?"

"Guard-Captain Aveline Hendyr." Isabela nodded. "She reminds me of

you; taciturn, oddly nerdy – she’s a brick wall where you’re a chimney. Though, I guess she’s a former soldier now.”

“Thanks...I think.”

“She escaped a darkspawn horde all the way to Gwaren,” Isabela continued. “Sailed into a new life. You’re still in the army though. Why is that?”

Charis watched his step. “The Clash at Ostagar overwhelmed many, from our soldiers to our mages and Templars. Though duty called all to the battlefield, not all were able to stay.”

“How about you?” Isabela asked. “Is that what you did? Were you at Ostagar?”

“...Perhaps we should focus on the task at hand, seeing as the Deep Roads are their own danger.”

“Oho,” Isabela snickered, “I’ve tagged and boarded more ships than you can count. I know an evasion when I see one.”

Varric fixed the torch in his hand as they navigated the Deep Roads. No doubt Charis wished to not speak of how he had been anchored to a desk while his brethren had been facing the blight. Fortunately, their trek underground eventually proved fruitful with the discovery of an armoured dwarf slumped against an ancient dwarven door.

Charis cautiously approached. “Are you one of Yevhen’s sons?”

“Sweet mother of partha,” the stranger removed their helmet, revealing a square, weary face. “Father sent you? Please, you have to save my brothers! Iwan locked Merin behind this door and ran off to claim the Heartdrinker for himself. I tried to warn him about the danger of golems ahead, but I lost him through the lyrium channels! If only I knew my way back to the surface – I would have called for help!”

“Peace,” Charis helped the young man up and handed him his own torch. “Follow the markers back to the surface. We’ll send your brothers out after you.”

“Best of the Stone,” the dwarf thanked profusely and fled the way they came.

Isabela cocked a brow at Charis. “Breaking through ancient dwarven

doors requires more than a good lockpick.”

“Then we’ll find another way around,” Charis determined. “Or you two will. I’ll chase after Iwan before he kills himself trying to find a ‘Heartdrinker.’”

Varric spluttered after Charis’ vanishing back. “There might be *golems*! You’re running into the dark, Shiny, and you don’t actually *glow*...! Shit.”

Isabela surveyed the ancient dwarven door and its adjacent hallways. “On the bright side, if he dies, then it’s one less knife at your back.”

“We don’t know he’s actually a spy,” Varric grumbled, spotting a crumbling wall. The two of them warily squeezed through a gap and immediately engaged with darkspawn. “If he dies, I’ll never know for sure!”

The two of them eventually found and rescued Merin from a group of darkspawn, grudgingly acknowledging that their wisest next step was to head for the surface. As they trudged back, a rhythmic thumping in the earth gradually rose to their attention, quickly escalating into a cacophonous rain of loose dirt from the earth overhead. The three of them warily packed in close and faced outwards in every direction, before Varric squinted through the dust in the cavernous distance.

“Is that...?”

“*Keep moving!*”

Isabela and Merin turned around to follow Varric’s line of sight, where the distant figure of Charis could be seen *booking* it while hauling an armoured dwarf over one shoulder. As Charis grew larger in view, they could decipher a sword glowing with runes in Charis’ free hand, swinging in time with Charis’ rapid strides.

“*Unhand me, human!*”

“*Move, I say!*”

That was when a cluster of golems charged around the corner.

“Maker’s breath,” Varric muttered in shock. “That’s our cue to check out!”

The five of them bolted out of the Deep Roads, wildly searching for

painted stone markers through flickering torchlight before pivoting the correct direction with unexpected athleticism. Varric dropped his torch and fired at the cracks of a stone mezzanine ahead of them, before Charis axed his runed sword through it as they passed under. The ruins collapsed behind them like crashing waves until sunlight finally pierced their eyes, welcoming them to the surface. The violent tumbling of ancient stone swallowed any noise of their pursuers until the mountainside choked out only dust. The group of five couldn't return to Kirkwall's streets fast enough.

Charis dumped his cargo at Yevhen's feet with a grunt. "Your child."

Merin and the apparently oldest son, Emrys, helped their brother up despite his uncooperative jerking away from their hands.

"I found it first," Iwan raged. "That relic is mine!"

Yevhen backhanded his son, everyone's eyes politely flinching away. "Sacrificing your own family, Iwan? Only shame belongs to you!"

While Yevhen berated his son, Emrys handed Varric, Charis, and Isabela a handful of sovereigns in gratitude. Charis responded by kneeling and offering the runed sword to Emrys.

"Serah," Emrys breathed, "I can't claim this. An ancient dwarf smithed Heartdrinker at the time of the First Blight. My ancestry and personal accomplishments assure I'm unworthy of the blade."

"You stayed to protect your family," Charis disagreed. "You've earned it."

Emrys peeked at the still occupied Yevhen and Iwan, then at the elven woman and Merin's encouraging faces. Emrys shyly accepted the sword with a deep nod. "Thank you, Messere Tethras and...."

"Friends," Charis finished.

Emrys faltered at the pointed lack of a name. "Oh. Then...best of the vein, friends."

Varric, Isabela, and Charis quickly escaped before Yevhen could turn his energy on them. When they finally walked out of earshot, Charis sighed.

"If you've no more errands for me today," the soldier turned to Varric, "I plan to wash the Deep Roads out of my hair."

“Same,” Isabela groaned. “Hey, Charis; Hanged Man later tonight?”

Charis briefly met their gazes, the shape of his eyes relaxed. “... Maybe.”

X

Varric exhaled in sweet relief as he broke into Fenris’s mansion. Exposure to Hightown air vastly helped dry Varric’s chest hair still damp from a recent bath. Anyone in Garrett’s friend group knew that Fenris didn’t own a key to his squatting place. If one wanted to visit the fugitive slave, one had to bring a lockpicking set. Or climb through a window, like Isabela and Merrill.

After a stroll up carpeted stairs, Varric arrived at a scene of Garrett and Fenris contributing to a littered table of drained wine bottles. Garrett knocked a glass of Antivan brandy back, before Fenris tipped a bottle over to refill it. For once, Fenris conservatively sipped from his bottle, while Garrett took a swig of his drink with starkly flushed cheeks. The mercenary’s lips were curled downwards with severe displeasure.

Varric cautiously sat down across them. “What’s the occasion?”

Fenris sent him a look. “Hawke received a letter from his brother.”

Oh.

Varric eyed a sheaf of inked parchment in Garrett’s hands. Over the course of the man’s drinking, the papers had shuffled out of order. “Looks like he had a lot of love to send.”

Garrett clicked his teeth. “Lots of, quote, ‘reasons, not excuses,’ unquote.”

Varric hid a wince.

Sunlight bounced off Garrett’s brandy, turning his brown eyes a liquid amber. “Carver didn’t visit us *once* since leaving home — he didn’t even attend father’s funeral. Yet when I last saw him, he was busy reading *letters*.” Garrett took another swig of brandy. “Obviously, he was receiving mail just *fine*. He just didn’t care to read Bethany’s.”

Varric cleaned up the table, sitting bottles upright for organisation. “You said Carver was always irked by yours and Bethany’s closeness with your father. However, his love and trust for Bethany *is* as real as

their twin bond.”

When alone with a Hawke, Garrett’s friends addressed the individual by their surname. Otherwise, Garrett received less intimacy but more respect as “Hawke,” while Bethany and Carver were referred to by their first names.

At Garrett’s reluctant nod, Varric continued. “Sometimes, little brothers behave in ways contrary to their own feelings. Junior probably spurned those letters in a bid for attention. He was in a new environment surrounded by complete strangers! He was likely hoping *you* would visit *him*. Then when your father suddenly caught an illness and passed, Carver must have felt crushed with guilt, to the extent that he was too ashamed to reach out and fix it. Then the blight hit. Not a great cocktail for heart-to-heart talks.”

Garrett grumbled, yet visibly placated. “He could at least see me face to face, instead of writing me an essay. The blight ended years ago.”

Fenris corked his bottle of brandy. “Mail for your uncle’s house just arrived today.”

Varric encouragingly nodded. “Kirkwall has also loosened its travel restrictions on Fereldens only recently. I’m sure Junior is pacing atop a ship crossing the sea as we speak, wondering how to finally sneak in and face you and your family. Don’t worry, Hawke. I’ll have my contacts keep an eye out for a little Ferelden soldier boy with a visible inferiority complex.”

Finally, Garrett cracked a smile.

Fenris slowly relieved the glass from Garrett’s fingers. “Hendyr is also captain of the City Guard. I bet she’ll do the same if you ask.”

Garrett sighed, carding his fingers through his hair. “At least I can assure Mother that he’s truly alive. She was worried that Carver had been on the *front lines* of the blight, instead of behind a desk.” The Hawke matriarch tended to simultaneously coddle and think highly of her children. “Some of this letter is for her and Bethany, too.”

The younger sister was also a sensitive topic, based on the setting. When only Bartrand and his crew had returned from the expedition – presumably having left Varric, Garrett, and the rest for dead – Bethany had taken up the burden of financially supporting herself and her mother. Without Garrett’s unique charm and quick thinking, it had only been a matter of time before the Templars had eventually

discovered her casting magic. The week Garrett had returned from the Deep Roads, the Templars had already been hustling Bethany out Gamlen's door. The loss had hit Lady Hawke hard. Bethany now maintained a close relationship with Garrett and Leandra through letters sent by trusted couriers. Due to Leandra's influence as an Amell, the woman was also able to occasionally visit Bethany in the Gallows' courtyard.

Naturally, inked papers weren't the same as having a sibling to hug and joke around with.

Garrett obviously felt reminded of the fact by Carver's letters.

"Sometimes, I wonder...." Garrett massaged the beginnings of a headache away and sighed heavily. "I always wanted the family together, and never imagined my brother would want to live somewhere else or my father would join the Maker. Carver is...." Garrett's lips wobbled. "I remember him as the little brother who never had a knee that wasn't scraped or trousers without holes. Whatever drove Carver out of Lothering, I should have protected him from it."

Fenris spoke gently. "You can't blame yourself, Hawke."

"I failed him twice," Garrett denied. "The second time, I allowed myself to be carried away by my emotions, and stomped off without seeking Carver out after our conversation in the tavern. I might have missed something in that conversation. Mother said it often of Father, Bethany, and I: that the Hawkes *feel* strongly."

Varric had noticed. Even compared to other mages like Anders or Merrill, the Hawke siblings possessed unpredictable streaks of stubbornness or spontaneity. In the beginning of Varric's friendship with Garrett, he had often gambled with Garrett's humorous tone to gauge if the mercenary literally meant what he said or not. Bethany could even smile and nod when Templars spoke of bringing all mages into the Circle, but passing by a single qunari or Tal-Vashoth could tear a confession out of her that she *loathed* qunari. Apparently, one had killed one of her friends and their entire family back in Lothering. The vitriol had been unexpected.

"I need red wine," Garrett muttered with a turn of his head. "I should calm down before meeting Jansen."

"Speaking of the Bone Pit," Varric chirped, "faceless thieves have been carrying out raids on the cargo shipments. The Coterie plans to



investigate the matter.”

“Ruthlessly,” Garrett recognised, rising from the table. “I better reach Jansen first. Great Maker, for the past few years, it has been spider infestations, walking undead, and brittle pickaxes. If Bartiere doesn’t hold up his end of funding proper tools and protection, I’m about to have one less business partner.”

Like Varric, Garrett preferred to leave transactional matters to money-minded people. Unlike Varric, however, Garrett possessed the shrewdness and charisma to manage a commercial business, if only the mercenary also possessed the interest.

Fenris stood up with him, subtly guiding Garrett past his alcohol collection. “Where will Jansen be at this time of day?”

“In the Bone Pit with the workers,” Garrett replied. “But first, Darktown.”

Garrett stalked off for a door in Darktown paired with a burning lantern despite the hour. Varric and Fenris followed him into Anders’ newly-located clinic. As an active member of the Mage Underground and as an apostate himself, Anders regularly moved his clinic without warning. The less fortunate who needed affordable healing or help knew to search for a lit lantern.

“Hawke,” Anders greeted from over a wash basin. “Mind passing that towel?”

Garrett ferretted a clean rag from a pile that had fallen from a makeshift clothesline. “I’m glad to see you taking care of yourself.”

“Medicine requires clean hands,” Anders drawled. “Not to worry, I keep myself groomed – just not for when you’re here.”

“Ouch,” Garrett chuckled. “Am I why you avoid Hightown?”

Anders’ eyes tellingly flitted to Fenris. “If the Blooming Rose asks me to work for them one more time, I’m never stepping foot in Hightown again.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re not going there.” Garrett grinned. “I have to check on Jansen and his labour union over at the Bone Pit. They might need a healer – or a cat.”

Fenris deadpanned. “Hawke.”

“Justice can spy on people better than anyone here,” Garrett defended. “No one suspects the cat!”

“You’re not throwing an abomination at the Coterie,” Fenris calmly replied.

“I’ll go.” Anders smirked as he strolled over with a modest staff easily mistaken for a walking stick. Given Kirkwall’s abundance of stairs, people with such aids weren’t uncommon. “I want to see Fenris avoid a harmless furball like it’s the blight.”

A full-grown tabby sprung onto Anders’ shoulders, draping itself over feathered pauldrons. Fenris immediately backed away a step.

“Greetings, mortals.”

Anders huffed. “Why do you like Hawke more than me?”

“Does it seem that way?” Justice’s tail flicked Anders’ ear. “Mayhaps opportunities to realise justice frequent the mortal’s presence.”

The possessed cat was an unlikely spy for Anders, who himself was a link in the Mage Underground. Justice excelled at discreetly gathering information, scouting ahead, and watching his allies’ backs. Still, the feline had a hard time not taking immediate action on injustices he witnessed. As a spirit warrior cat, Justice was essentially an indestructible but mostly harmless furball with a limited sense of timing and a fondness for Garrett’s odd luck.

Garrett threw an arm around Fenris’ shoulders and dragged everyone along to the Bone Pit, chuckling. On the way, they passed by Karl Thekla returning from Lowtown’s market. The greying apostate was Anders’ former lover, snatched from the Grey Wardens in Ferelden to run away with Anders across the Waking Sea. While the couple had long split apart to walk separate paths, they still maintained an amicable relationship that had fueled Anders to rescue Karl from possibly dying in a Joining.

Karl had been hesitantly grateful, considering he had been ready for the commitment, but the older man could hardly leave his friend alone to his actions. Thus while Anders ran his clinic, Karl was settled in a room above Lirene's Fereldan Imports to help the plight of Ferelden refugees. The party nodded to Karl as they left the city and traced caravan routes for Kirkwall’s largest mine. Around a narrow bend, they stumbled over qunari corpses and scattered shade demons.

“That explains the missing patrol,” Varric said as they cleared the

threat. “Should I be honoured that the Qunari suspected you over the rest of us rabble?”

Garrett snorted. “As if I have a reason to ambush qunari. I try to limit ‘pissing off foreigners’ to once a week.”

“The Veil is thin over this land,” Justice remarked. “It confounds me that demons would exploit the weakness just to see this pile of dirt.”

Varric gasped. “Hey, I live here!”

Fenris shook his head. “In the name of harmless research, the ancient Imperium deliberately thinned the Veil in outposts over time. Kirkwall and Aeonar were just two of several victims.”

“Again with the pointed facts,” Anders drawled. “Abducting mages and depriving them of meaningful relationships isn’t the answer.”

Fenris side-eyed him. “Neither is fooling yourself into believing that demons can be pets. Also, you’re repressed.”

“And you’re not!?”

Varric chuckled. “Now, now, elf. Blondie won’t let the feline bite you – again. You can trust him.”

Fenris shot Varric a look. “The mage keeps company with a *demon*.”

“By that logic,” Garrett teased, “so do I.”

Fenris melted a degree. “You know you’re different.”

“Hypocrite,” Anders muttered.

Varric snorted. He was with two cats, a dog, and a bird. When a wooden rattle echoed from the mountainous path ahead of them, the party pivoted for cover while Justice pounced onto steep rock, stealthily stealing ahead. When a panicked screech and a feline yowl split the air, the party caught their cue to intervene.

A Ferelden labourer fell on his rear, vainly trying to tear Justice off of his face. “*Bride of the Maker!*”

Garrett twirled his staff into his grip, suddenly knocking a row of robbers off their feet with an invisible force. A more pointed gesture thrust them into a nearby rockface, shattering bone. Anders summoned a wall of fire ahead of the path before anyone could

retreat, throwing Fenris in stark relief as he ghosted an arm through a robber that had nearly slipped past the party. The robber froze in Fenris' grasp.

The fugitive slave cocked a brow. "The truth will set you free."

"B-Brekker..." the robber choked out, "it was all his idea——!"

"Stop attacking my cat!" Anders' wail interrupted them.

Garrett glanced at Varric who had watched their backs with Bianca. At the merchant prince's confirmation that they were safe, Garrett slung his staff back into his harness like the dramatic spear that it was. With a long, thin blade comprising one-third of the weapon, only the milky-coloured focus stone attached to its pommel suggested that Garrett wielded a staff. The mage kissed his teeth.

"Alright, Justice."

The tabby darted off of the labourer's face, leaving behind scratch marks. Anders gaped at Justice while the abomination roosted on his shoulders, apparently valuing the mage no higher than a mobile perch. There was no question whom Justice actually listened to.

Garrett frowned at the scene of a ruined caravan and dead miners, before looking down at the one at his feet. "Sabin."

"Master Garrett," the man morosely recognised. "Please understand; I needed the money. My family and I can hardly—"

"Who's Brekker?" Garrett cut off.

Sabin leaned on his elbows, sitting up. "A member of the Coterie. He agreed to share his profits with me if I helped him ambush caravans leaving the pit."

Garrett turned in Fenris' direction. "Who's Brekker?"

"One of our leaders," the robber surrendered. "Mostly works the southern side of Kirkwall. H-He detests Fereldens and has always envied your success, Messere Hawke. That's all I know, I swear."

Fenris glided his arm all the way through the bandit, solidifying his limb once the two of them were separated. The bandit immediately took off for the distance.

Justice's eyes narrowed at the horizon. "The crook slaughtered

innocent people escorting this caravan.”

Varric wound Bianca back. “That he did.”

*Twang!*

*Thump.*

Garrett helped Sabin up on his feet. “Poverty drives anyone to desperate lengths, but I don’t want to see you or your family again. Ever.”

Sabin wiped sweat off his brow and bowed his head in shame. “Brekker will kill me.”

“I’ll handle him.” Garrett placed a hand on Sabin’s shoulder, drawing the miner’s eyes to Garrett’s expression. “Sabin. Please understand.”

At the echoed phrasing, Sabin’s hesitation crumbled, and the labourer bolted for the horizon with a speed that spoke of his fear that Varric would shoot him down. The party watched him run off.

“Fenris, Anders, Justice,” Garrett addressed, “check on Jansen and the others and see if any are harmed or are in with Brekker. I’m going to tell Bartiere that he should demand his money back from his employed protection.”

Justice couldn’t lie to save his life, and Varric recognised the look on Garrett’s face. The mercenary planned to take a page from Varric’s book and fabricate a story to turn the Coterie’s attention away from Sabin. Indeed, when Garrett and Varric eventually intercepted Hubert Bartiere and his Coterie contacts from storming the mines, Garrett tossed them a Coterie badge looted from one of several corpses.

“It was Brekker,” Garrett stated.

A Coterie member cut him off. “We know, Hawke. The Coterie conducted an internal investigation and found Brekker has been skimming. We’re dealing with him our way.”

Hubert stepped in. “But he was also working with a miner!”

“Brekker threatened the man’s family,” Garrett boldly lied, “even killed his dog. His *dog*, Bartiere. I’ve since sent the miner off running with the fear of the Maker in him.”

Hubert hesitated, acknowledging the weight of butchering a Ferelden's mabari. "Whatever, just get those miners in line!"

Hubert and the Coterie members pivoted off, acquiesced.

Varric released a breath. "I owe Shiny one."

Garrett led the way back to the mines. "Another one of your contacts?"

"Possibly Bartrand's spy," Varric chuckled. "I haven't told you about him?"

## Chapter End Notes

Garrett's staff resembles the one from the trailer. You know, important things.

I sometimes use mage and apostate interchangeably, given the Mage Underground helps "apostates," not "Circle mages." Thus, I might refer to Anders, Garrett, or Merrill with either label.

# Worldly

## Chapter Notes

How can I forget to mention that [Ravaelt](#) added this fic to [TV Tropes](#)? Thank you, Ravaelt!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Try again,” Isabela crowed with a grin. “I saw you draw two cards.”

Charis sighed, returning a card to the middle of the deck. “Card games shouldn’t require cheating.”

“They teach life skills,” Varric defended.

That night, Charis was only wearing chainmail under a plain surcoat with a bow, quiver of arrows, and his never-drawn greatsword by his side. Of course, the soldier also wore a black turtleneck under everything. Varric was scared to ask if the ensemble was what Charis considered “casual” clothes. Considering the fact that Charis slept with a dagger in hand, the forecast wasn’t looking good. At least the soldier had agreed to play a round of card games that night, albeit without gambling.

Varric subtly glanced in the direction that Charis’ gaze twitched. Past Isabela, an elven man in robes as brown as his hair disappeared up the Hanged Man’s stairs. A beat later, three Rivainis wordlessly rose from separate tables and followed.

Charis sighed, standing up. “You two have me beaten.”

Varric and Isabela rose after him, mildly affronted and more than amused.

“You can’t quit so easily, soldier,” Isabela chided. “Oh, don’t be a sore loser. I know you can hear me—”

Charis knocked – then *busted down* a door and twisted a Rivaini’s neck, catching another’s dagger with the chainmail around his arm. He swiftly disarmed his attacker and slammed the person’s head down on a bedside table while Isabela sent a dagger sailing into the third Rivaini’s chest. Charis looked at her.

Isabela retrieved her dagger with raised brows. “What? If you died, I

would have had to deal with them without a meat shield.”

Varric pointed Bianca at the Rivaini corpses just in case. The suspicious group had just started to jump the brunette elf from earlier when Charis had broken in.

Said elf scrambled up to his elbows and grabbed a broken table leg, jabbing it in their direction. “What do you want!?”

Charis ignored him to rifle through the attackers’ pockets. “If you flee out the Hanged Man’s front door, there are Antivan assassins lying in wait to ambush you. Ethnically Antivan, not Crows.”

The elven man warily picked himself up with the table leg still in hand. “How do you know that?”

“Earlier this week, I killed Carta loyalists targeting you.” Charis found a note among the attackers, glanced at it, and tossed it aside to stand up. The note fluttered, revealing a gang name. “Then a Qunari death squad. Just now, it was the Rivaini Legendary Beards. You’re avoiding Hightown because the Denerim Avengers are stalking its streets for you.”

“They’re planning to steal into the viscount’s office,” the man cautiously corrected. On closer inspection, he was around Charis’ age, roughly thirty years old. “They’re just waiting for a stranger like me to break in first – and I’m not after seals or money! I simply mean to erase the last of any record that I’ve been in Kirkwall.”

“I know,” Charis said. “You still need a route out of here unnoticed, though. What you seek is a path through the Wounded Coast.”

The stranger picked up a walking stick leaning against the wall.

Charis looked at him. “I’m not your enemy, Sketch.”

“Forgive me my scepticism,” the mage replied.

Varric’s attention bounced between the two oddly stiff males. Isabela ignored everyone to pick through the corpses’ pockets.

Charis sighed. “I’m a friend of Leliana’s.”

Sketch scoffed. “A decent spy would know our connection—”

Charis tossed him a bottle of distilled Antivan plum brandy that Sketch hastily caught with both hands. His staff clattered aside.



“Tug’s favourite,” Sketch murmured, bodily loosening. “Alright, say I believe you. How do I leave the Hanged Man?”

“From behind me,” Charis said, pivoting for the door. “If the law asks, I knocked on your door, then broke in when I heard a commotion. Tethras, Isabela; sorry about the mess. You’re welcome to what the Beards had.”

Varric snorted, strolling after them while his mind raced. “No way, Shiny. I sense another story in the making that’s worth more than three copper.”

“Oh, please.” Isabela swiftly followed them. “An opportunity to loot a bunch of people while you three foot the effort? Count me in.”

True to her word, the raider “supervised” Charis distract assassins long enough for Varric or Sketch to get a good shot in. Fog began to roll in as they approached the Viscount’s Keep, Sketch now stealing glances at Charis.

“Ser Charis,” the soldier offered.

“A soldier,” Sketch identified. “Why are you averse to drawing your sword? You’re decent at a bow in close quarters, but the dwarf is better.”

Varric preened. Of course he was, Bianca always outshone her competition.

Charis shook his head. “My sword is too flashy.”

City Guard patrols carried torches where they marched, and Kirkwall’s lighthouse blanketed the mainland in a soft glow when fog came. Charis’ gilded sword *could* believably catch light unwanted, though likely not as distractedly as in the day. Varric was more curious about the social, political, or economic connection between Charis and a stranger like Sketch. The answer could potentially shed light on who Charis was.

Varric mildly commented. “I’m more curious how a lone mage could attract the ire of fascinatingly colourful groups.”

Sketch huffed. “Avoid storytellers when you can,” came the cryptic reply.

Charis sent the mage a sympathetic look.

Varric bit back reflexive sarcasm. “Despite their height, I didn’t take the Qunari weak for tall tales.”

“The death squad was from the docks,” Charis stated. “The qunari there have been separated from Seheron and Par Vollen for three years now. Any intel they have, they gathered themselves, just as any actions they take are their own.”

Isabela drawled. “Here I thought they were following the Qun.”

“They are,” Charis confirmed. “They’re living by the philosophy — without a connection to the rest of their society. Ordinarily, the Qun is enough, but the Arishok is among them. He’s supposed to govern the soldiers of Qunari society — the ‘body’ — while in consensus with the Arigena who governs the ‘mind,’ and the Ariqun who governs the ‘soul.’”

Isabela perked up. “Meaning the Arishok and his crew are moving blind enough to fall for tall tales.”

“Plausible tales,” Charis amended, sharing a look with Sketch. “The qunari who actually specialise in gathering information are called Ben-Hassrath. They fall under the Ariqun’s leadership, where they serve to protect the faith, not embark on expeditions as the Arishok and his soldiers did – or whatever spurred them to sail as far south as the Waking Sea.”

Varric casually reeled in his line. “Ah, but the Carta make it a point to know who they’re killing, aside from instances of collateral damage. The Merchant’s Guild and the Carta share an invested interest in maintaining the flow of prosperity on the surface. If an affluent Guild member is willing to pay for someone’s death, there is a Carta group that will answer.”

“As Charis said,” Sketch shrugged, “plausible tales. Tethras, was it? You would know better than I. House Tethras was the most prestigious family in the Merchant’s Guild, before Bartrand Tethras’ social decline. If the Carta wrongfully targeted an innocent person like me, the fault lies with the Guild member who sent them.”

If Varric directed the topic to Charis, he risked betraying his suspicions.

“The Guild tends to not make mistakes,” Varric carefully replied.

“There’s your answer,” Sketch said, “for how a lone mage could fall

into disproportionate trouble. The people chasing him like to believe they're exempt from error. What about you, Charis? No one's dogging your footsteps, yet you seek trouble anyway. Are you a Kirkwall guardsman? Although, your rank says otherwise. Your accent is also Ferelden."

Charis snorted softly. "And yours isn't?"

"I'm just curious." The non-rhotic lilt in Sketch's voice suddenly melted away, leaving behind a neutral dwarven accent. Without a topside glottalization or Orzammar enunciation, the background of Sketch's voice couldn't be placed. "So far as I know, political games in the Free Marches or Ferelden rarely require the kind of people Leliana would acquaint herself with, and you seem the straight-edge type."

Charis responded in a neutral accent. "If one wishes for order around themselves, one must respect it."

Sketch and Varric blinked at the sudden change.

Charis' lips twitched at Sketch, before the soldier restored his Ferelden accent. "Like you, I'm passing through. My visit is just a little longer than yours."

Sketch stepped closer, interested. "You've spent extensive time around immigrants and smugglers?"

"My neutral accent sources from elsewhere," Charis replied with surprising honesty.

Varric recognised the fond line in Sketch and Charis' shoulders. He often witnessed it between Ferelden immigrants who realised they shared a similar story. Charis' guard was slipping – though to what extent, Varric couldn't identify. He found himself thoroughly puzzled at Charis' unknown story. Dwarves from Orzammar could be counted among immigrants and smugglers, but what did that mean for Charis? For Varric? Bartrand was indisputably a genius regardless of his bluster, but how could he possibly end up connected with a person like Charis, if at all? However, at the same time, what could attract the dwarf-influenced Charis across the Waking Sea if not a dwarven connection?

Isabela's voice interrupted Varric's thoughts. "You're a worldly sort, soldier. Have we ever crossed paths in Llomerryn?"

"I'm no sailor," Charis refuted, "just well-read. I also guess a lot."

“About qunari?” Varric rose a brow.

“And the Carta,” Charis listed, “Antivans, Rivainis, even my own people. When suspicious, deadly characters are after a friend of a friend, that’s all I need to know to intervene.”

“Ah,” Sketch recognised, “an idealist.”

“Morally just,” Charis corrected, “I hope.”

Sketch’s reaction was stolen by an ambush at the steps to the Viscount’s Keep. Ferelden outlaws, presumably the Denerim Avengers, steered clear of Sketch to focus on the mage’s company. The criminals likely thought to coerce Sketch into opening a stealthy path into the viscount’s office. Their plan shattered when the party defeated them and Charis shot the last avenger in the chest with an arrow – just as a sword cleanly decapitated the gangster like a hot knife through butter.

The outlaw collapsed with a spray of blood and slumped. A liquid crimson curtain parted to reveal academically-sloped cheekbones, waves of orange hair pulled back in a low ponytail, and a braided cord holding back flyaways from a stern forehead. Aveline Hendyr stepped over corpses on the stairs to the Viscount’s Keep without catching a single drop of blood on her City Guard uniform.

“Isabela,” Aveline greeted.

“Hendyr,” Isabela stuffed a pouch of coins down her tunic. “The manly one.”

“Leave my husband out of this,” Aveline sniffed, approaching Varric’s party without putting away her sword and shield.

“Guard-Captain,” Charis politely recognised, like he had not just opened a hole in someone.

Sketch stepped out of a puddle of blood and covertly shook his foot.

Varric slung Bianca over his shoulder.

“Cleaning the streets, I see,” Aveline deadpanned. “When I heard activity on the viscount’s steps, I had hoped for politicians.”

“No you didn’t,” Isabela immediately accused.

The two women exchanged smirks. “Perhaps,” Aveline allowed. “However, now I have criminal stains to clean, and four suspects.”

Charis pointed at Sketch. "He started it."

"Hey!"

"And they *were* criminals," Charis continued. "There will be more if this man, whom I've met only today, continues to stay in Kirkwall. We were just on our way escorting him out of the city."

"Through the walls of the Viscount's Keep?" Aveline cocked a brow, descending the last of the steps to stand nose-to-nose with Charis. He was just barely taller. "A likely story."

"And yet the truth," Isabela snickered. The raider was obviously ecstatic that she wasn't the prime suspect to a crime that Aveline found herself in charge of neutralising.

Aveline glanced at Sketch's two-handed grip of his walking stick. "Then a couple upstanding citizens wouldn't mind clearing out the Wounded Coast. The Evets Marauders have my guardsmen pinned down near Sundermount. I wouldn't be surprised if you suffered a casualty while clearing the brigands out."

Meaning Sketch would have to fake his death. Probably not for the first time.

Charis hesitated. "You're not leading the way?"

"I must guard the keep from potential thieves," Aveline dryly replied.

A peek at Charis' face confirmed that the soldier either planned to later break into the viscount's office and erase evidence of Sketch, or to directly appeal to the viscount, whether or not the lord would want to listen. Charis had that stubborn look about him.

Isabela perked up. "If we kill everyone, we get to keep their stuff."

"The Marauders have bounties on their heads," Aveline admitted. "I'm happy enough to have my guardsmen rescued from the situation. They're too altruistic to let the Evets Marauders slip away, and we can't afford to starve the outlaws out."

X

Under Aveline's critical eye, Charis and Sketch reluctantly led the party away to the Wounded Coast, where a humble patrol was firmly holding their position at the bottleneck of a looping cliff path. From

the elevated, narrow rock spires of the loop, the Evets Marauders volleyed arrows down the guardsmen's direction, discouraging further advancement.

The party huddled with the patrolmen behind rocky protrusions, Charis swiftly catching both sides up to speed with the situation. "How many archers?" he asked the guardsman in charge.

Lieutenant Harley braced her shield against the rain of arrows. "Seven. Two behind the southeast spires, two behind the south spires, and three down the middle."

Charis nodded, adjusting his bow. "Volley fire?" At the guardsmen's confused looks, he elaborated, "Does a row of them fire arrows, then switch with another row while they nock their next arrows?"

Sketch's eyes minutely widened with a mutter. "That would be deadlly efficient."

Harley shook her head. "The Marauders are brigands, not – soldiers." She gave Charis another look-over, willing to dispose of her confusion for immediate help. "The main threat is their blood mage and Evet himself. When one isn't bleeding you out and paralysing you, the other is replacing used traps."

"How's your aim?" Charis asked.

Harley snorted. "We're sick of sitting here with our rears hanging out. My trained archers and I will string our bows if you don't mind a support who's all thumbs."

"I'll take it." Charis nodded to the rest of the guards. "Press forward and seek the closest concealment. The archers will cover you until you reach the Marauders. Sketch, the blood mage is yours. I have the traps."

Varric blinked. "I'm with the lieutenant?"

"I trust Bianca's aim," Charis' lips quirked, "and I'm not sending you down a barrel for Sketch's sake. I'll take the risk."

Isabela waved a hand. "Hello? Traps could use a woman's touch."

"You're here to clean up," Charis reminded, "and as nice as you look in leather, it's not chainmail. The guards and I have the proper equipment for taking arrows."

Isabela's face twisted something funny. Varric didn't snort. The raider was simultaneously flattered and insulted by Charis' chivalry.

Charis intuitively held a hand out the same time Isabela twitched forward. "If you received an injury, G— it would kill me. Watch her."

Charis and the frontline guards stormed up the cliff path before Varric could react at Charis' pointed finger. Isabela fumed while Varric, Harley, and her guards suppressed the Marauders' archers, buying Charis, Sketch, and the rest of the guards time to clear out the cliffs. Flashes of arcane bolts, fire, and lightning pierced the night, granting brief outlines of the path's spires. In the corner of Varric's eye, he could have sworn he glimpsed a golden sword. Then the cliffs fell silent.

Guardsmen trickled out of the battlefield, signalling to Harley that the fight was over. Varric and Isabela warily strolled past disabled traps and scorched earth to find Charis crouched on the ground with his back to them, and Sketch standing in front of him with crossed arms and his staff slung over his shoulder. Charis was in the motions of wiping a sword on a fallen Marauder, but upon sight of Varric and Isabela, Sketch quickly jerked his chin. Charis rose, sheathing his sword with a turn that mostly concealed the blade until it was already enclosed to its hilt.

Flaming Marauder corpses cast an orange glow on the scene, but Varric's memory of a golden blade stirred at what he caught of Charis' sword. Completely gilded swords were rare, but not unheard of. Considering the admiration that blades like Summer Sword and Vigilance received, imitations flourished where coins allowed, especially among Orlesian nobility. Like the entire country of Ferelden, it wasn't strange if Orlais felt entitled to Summer Sword.

It was just another tick mark towards Varric's suspicions that Charis was of noble blood.

"We're done here," Sketch determined with a look at Isabela, "unless you haven't satisfied your avarice yet?"

Isabela sniffed, fixing a stolen bandolier across her body. "They just had gold."

*Just.*

Charis led the way out of the looping path. "The last stretch of Sketch's journey is past Sundermount; not a lot of looting

opportunities there.”

“Do you so easily assume not to include me in anything?” Isabela huffed. “You know, I’m a raider.”

“So I’ve seen,” Sketch mumbled.

“I can defend myself,” Isabela pressed on.

“So I’ve seen,” Charis allowed. When they passed enough guards to stray out of earshot, he sighed. “I’m going to lead Sketch around the Dalish clan settled on Sundermount. The tunnels that lead outside of Kirkwall from there are mostly cleared of danger thanks to the clan.” He turned to Sketch. “The tunnels open up to a river that runs down the Vimmark Mountains and leads to the farmlands of Wildervale. Where you head from there is your prerogative.”

“Many thanks,” Sketch replied.

Varric cocked a brow, following closer. “The Dalish aren’t as fond of people as they are of their trees, Shiny.” Passing by the Dalish without a helmet in the dark wouldn’t be good for Charis’ health.

The soldier lit a torch unfazed. As the group hiked up Sundermount’s winding paths for its other side, pale flickers of light alerted them of Clan Sabrae’s location. Then one of the lights descended their way.

“Ca—” a Dalish hunter called out, then slowed down, lifting his torch to capture their party. “Charis, thank the M— Creators! The clan could use a friend right now!”

Charis halted in surprise. “Pol?”

The hunter grabbed Charis’ hand unexpectedly comfortably and dragged him off the path for the peak. “A coma threatens one of our own due to an odd sickness. The keeper knows better. Come!”

Varric, Isabela, and Sketch followed in bewilderment, treading into Clan Sabrae’s camp unchallenged. The young hunter tugged Charis to the main bonfire where Keeper Marethari stood with eyes lost in its flames. The elderly woman lifted her head at the noise before perking up.

“Charis...” the keeper tested the name on her tongue. “A welcome visit, though unusual.” At Pol’s agape mouth, she continued, “The sickness that besets Feynriel isn’t mundane, but magical in nature.”



Pol released Charis' hand, bodily drooping.

Charis bit his lip. "I'm sorry I can't help—"

Elves had begun peeking out of their tents at the commotion, when a young teen suddenly bolted out of his cover to desperately tackle Charis' waist.

"My friend!"

Varric recognised Feynriel wrap his arms around Charis, who looked down at the top of a blonde head, baffled. Before that night, the two must have never met.

Charis hesitantly returned the young teen's embrace. "I'm sorry, I think you have me confused with someone else."

Feynriel allowed Charis to gently push him back by the shoulders, and met his gaze. The kid's words left him muffled, but Varric thought he could hear, "I don't. You're my friend's friend. You look just like him."

X

Carver's hands ached more often. It was a trend since his arrival to Kirkwall.

Considering Carver had stolen Charis' armour and snuck out of Denerim, Carver owed Charis to at least polish the man's armour. As for Nails, well...Carver *had* accumulated a wealth of vacation days, seeing as he had never taken a holiday for himself since joining the king's army. Carver had generously left a letter on Nails' desk declaring that Carver was off to observe Ferelden's security in person, so he was still technically working. The commander of the king's army would understand.

Kirkwall provided both opportunities and hurdles. When Carver had tried expanding his network through the errand boys and girls in Kirkwall, prolific corruption had discouraged him from risking the people's safety and from trusting them with his tasks. This left him dependent on the monthly visits a member of Oriana's merchant web made to Kirkwall, when Carver could pass and receive sensitive letters. The first excuse Carver could craft for the visits originated from *someone else's* life: pads and tampons. Let the public assume Carver was providing for a lover or whatnot; the mediaeval equivalent of care products was inarguably a monthly need.

However, the limitation conversely helped conceal Carver's involvement with Oriana's merchant connections. Carver didn't want to know the parties who were interested in the "Postboy's" identity and origins, but Carver hoped that temporarily relocating to Kirkwall threw would-be trackers off his tail.

Since his promotion to captain, Carver had been able to expand options for Ferelden's navy — whose last task had been to search for Maric's body — through Oriana's web. Said web was apparently attracting the label of "the Postal Service." While most soldiers in the king's army were now too low in rank to address Carver by his nickname, and no one would be quick to associate military nicknames with a smuggling ring, Carver still disliked the risks. The illusion of an all-seeing, all-knowing shadowy figure was apparently protecting Oriana, her family, and their allies from simply being killed up the chain until their web completely fractured.

What might Carver be organising through them, one might ask?

Easy.

A political uprising across the sea and far west of the Free Marches.

Though Celene and Briala dreamt of marrying one another, only Celene had believed the idea possible. The empress had reached out to the Ser Carver whom she knew had enabled the Antivan smuggling ring at the beginning, given Carver had signed his soup of lies to Celene with his own name. It was an oversight Carver never repeated since then. Of course, he couldn't have known that what he had started would result in Celene and Anora becoming pen pals.

He digressed.

To marry Celene and Briala, they essentially needed the same situation that had given rise to a political marriage between the Couslands and the Howes: one party with influence needed assurity that they would never experience a wrong again. Hence, Carver's encouragement for Briala to develop a status as the "ambassador" for Orlais' sizeable elven population. Meanwhile, Carver also organised the political build-up towards Celene and Briala's nuptial goals.

In the past year, a child in Orlais' slums had thrown a rock at a Lord Mainserai's coach, spurring a well-liked elven trader named Lemet to volunteer the blame upon himself. Though Mainserai hadn't killed Lemet, he had disproportionately punished the trader, causing the slum's citizens to rebel. Briala had organised for the citizens to

secretly migrate out of the slums for alienages or other places. Meanwhile, with soft accusations that Celene was too lenient on elves, the empress had then had the slums burned. The people of the slums had been persuaded to conceal the truth of their survival, and encouraged Orlais' elven population to demand justice for the wrongs they had suffered twice over.

The nobles who had already ostracised Mainserai for his actions currently weren't in a hurry to help Celene with her issues. They were incentivised to in fact work against her when pockets of elven resistance across the country lead to strikes, and the nobles began to lose their main workforce. They slowly realised that Celene's formerly open attitude on elves was preferable to her conformant one.

Mixed institutions like the University of Orlais, which were comfortable with their coexistence with elves, were additionally disturbed by the events. The Frostback Basin contributions to academic society hadn't helped. It was a plain fact that Orlais' founding emperor had cherished elves among his closest friends, and had even appointed one of them to a position easily as influential as his own. This reality in turn strengthened the social threat of modern-day Ferelden, which had already displayed a willingness to count an elf among its nobility. There was also the possibility of losing face with other countries like Starkhaven who sent affluent citizens to study in Orlais.

Carver had also pulled Anora into the plan. Influenced by the queen, Ferelden held a marginally more festive anniversary of its independence, reminding the general, international public that the kingdom had rebelled before against an empire who had thought to use Fereldens as free labour. The celebration implied that to stop Orlesians like Grand Duke Gaspard from thinking of retaking Ferelden, the kingdom might support Orlais' elves in taking over the empire.

Celene and Briala responded by diplomatically attending Anora's baby shower, thus wordlessly, publicly confirming Briala's influence as an Orlesian elven ambassador. In private, however, the three women genuinely partied along with Cailan over the good news. In Carver's correspondence with the women, Anora amusedly informed him that she had named Celene godmother, while Cailan had named Loghain godfather. The Grey Warden had apparently succinctly written back, "Congratulations."

All in all, Celene, Briala, Anora, and Carver were delicately balancing the required hostility for an "arranged" marriage between the empress

and the elven ambassador.

That was just *one* massive plot Carver was currently handling from Kirkwall. The weight of the future sometimes kept him up at night. For example, for the safety of his Antivan contacts, Carver excluded them from his search for the Tome of Koslun. Carver trusted them to keep tabs on Castillon, but locating the sacred scripture fell on him doing personal fieldwork.

It was jarring to see so many qunari clustered in one place. Each qunari in Kirkwall only had one pilum. Even fewer qunari were Sten, who were also equipped with their obligatory sword. What was more, the qunari had limited vitaar paint since they couldn't receive supplies from Seheron, so they had to use their paint sparingly.

Carver doubted that Kirkwall understood what this meant, and if he hadn't known his friend Sten, he would have been no better. It was like removing a longbow archer from the battlefield, placing them in a cramped space where they couldn't go to a smith for armour repairs, then telling them to defend themselves. Additionally, teaming up with fellow archers in an actual formation wasn't *allowed*, since that would mean declaring war.

It was a hopeless situation. Self-defence either became an unintentional declaration of war, or a pipe dream. There was no in-between.

And in a certain timeline, the qunari had persisted through it for *four years*.

Anyway.

The bottom line was, Carver didn't have support with all his problems. Some plans, he had to approach alone. Case in point, traipsing around Kirkwall at night as Ser Charis, Varric's Ferelden errand boy and occasional entertainment.

Carver never expected that the ruse would lead to an early journey into the Fade.

## Chapter End Notes

Is Carver purposefully speed-running Orlais' elven problem? Why yes. He's a busy person, his time is money!

Sketch's accent is from extensive years hiding among immigrants

and smugglers – including the dwarven kind – in Orlais to avoid Templars, until he ended up partnering with Leliana in the Game. Leliana herself writes that Sketch doesn't share a connection, resentment, or accent with city elves. Along with Leliana's opinion that Sketch may have originally been a slave spy planted in Orlais, you have an elven mage shaped by Tevinter, Orlesian, and dwarven influences with no apparent attachment to any of them. He's an interesting guy.

I don't know if it was too subtle, given the Unreliable Narrator tag is still active when Varric's in charge, but Someone Else had a [General American](#) accent in their past life. I love misunderstandings :)

Also, Carver was about to tell Isabela, "If you received an injury, Garrett would kill me."

# Blue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Feynriel's words froze the blood in Carver's veins.

Marethari reached out. "Now, da'len—"

"Keeper." Carver hesitated. "This is the dreamer you spoke of."

Marethari lowered her hand. "Sometimes, Feynriel's sleep lasts a whole day. I fear a coma might eventually take him. He needs a friend to navigate his dreams and show him how to wake up on his own."

"By battling the demons drawn to the kid," Sketch suddenly piped up from behind.

Carver inwardly cursed. This was not his night. He wouldn't have minded Sketch's company, but Varric and Isabela were too close to Garrett and Merrill for Carver to easily explain his status with Clan Sabrae.

Varric shrugged at Marethari. "Why can't you do it?"

"Feynriel trusts few to the necessary extent," Marethari replied with a confused covert glance at Carver. He had already insisted that the clan called him Charis before others, but he hadn't explained Feynriel's apparent ease with him. Carver subtly shook his head once. "With my gifts, however, I can at least perform the ritual to send a friend into the Fade where Feynriel's mind dwells."

Carver placed a hand on Feynriel's shoulder. The child still had his arms loosely hugging Carver's waist while watching the adults speak. "Though I can't explain it, he trusts me enough. We should handle this now."

Isabela spluttered. "You're entering the Fade alone?"

The beyond was a mystifying place for anyone, and fearful place for some.

"He's not," Varric corrected. "I'll support him."

Bloody merchant prince. Carver didn't know if Varric had learned his tell, but by the look in the dwarf's eye, Varric had noticed Carver's minutely trembling hands. Carver wasn't ashamed to admit that he was terrified, but now two children were relying on him. The Fade called.

"Fat chance," Carver rejected. "I can handle this."

"Hey, I owe the kid," Varric refuted. "I was there when Hawke sent him to the Dalish for his safety. I ought to see this through."

Feynriel murmured into Carver's stomach, "It's true, friend of Carver."

Carver sighed, pressing Feynriel against him. "At the first opportunity, Tethras, *please* betray me." So that Carver could kick him out of the Fade.

Varric's mouth opened, affronted.

Sketch groaned. "The demons are going to eat you all for *dinner*. I'm coming too."

Isabela quickly raised her hands. "I'll supervise your sleeping bodies."

"If it's settled," Marethari urged, "we should proceed."

As everyone tucked themselves in for an impromptu nap, Carver quietly pulled Marethari aside. "I know what you'll suggest, but Feynriel won't need it. He's a tough kid."

Marethari's lips thinned. "Sometimes the Templars have it right. Tranquility would be a mercy."

Carver sighed. There was no point in sharing the origin of Tranquility with Marethari that moment. "A mercy would be to let him go."

"No other clan would take him," Marethari began.

"To Tevinter," Carver elaborated.

Despite his reservations around Solas, the ancient dreamer would have been able to guide Feynriel. However, for better or worse, the wolf was still years out from awakening. At least in the north, Feynriel could end up connecting with Wynne. Shale would also prove to Feynriel that there were weirder situations.

Marethari reluctantly acquiesced that Feynriel's fate was in his hands.

Carver lied down next to the bonfire and slid his eyes shut. His last sight was Isabela hovering over the party while Marethari's hands lit with magic. A gentle suggestion sank into Carver's mind, and despite his anxiety, he fell asleep.

X

A room divided by hanging rags. A window opening to a dead end. Walls upon walls, but beyond the door was an open slum shaded by a painted tree.

The alienage. Feynriel's home before his relocation to Sundermount.

A man with long hair and faint smiling wrinkles leaned next to Feynriel, pointing to letters on parchment. "If I had known you were this smart, I would have brought you home with me to Antiva."

A demon. The fact nearly burst out of Carver as a word, but he contained the urge. A scan of his surroundings confirmed that Varric and Sketch had not followed him into the Fade, or at least not into this particular dream. So long as Feynriel maintained memories of places like the alienage or Clan Sabrae's camp, a version of the places would exist in the Fade while he was asleep. Demons drawn to Feynriel's power would likely lurk in those places, such as the false Vincento sitting beside Feynriel. Carver hoped Varric and Sketch were fine.

Carver stepped forward to intrude on the heartwarming scene. "Feynriel," he called.

His own voice startled him. Carver wasn't clothed in the likeness of Feynriel's mother, as he should have been. Otherwise, Feynriel's subconscious wouldn't have been able to accept him as an actor on his stage. Instead, Carver was himself, if lankier and several centimetres shorter. A hand through his hair confirmed that he was sporting a haircut he hadn't worn since he had been thirteen. Summer Sword was gone from his side. If Carver's younger self had been stretched out like taffy into his height at seventeen years old, then that was what Carver resembled in that moment.

Feynriel looked up. "Carver? What are you doing here?" The blonde teen stood up, the fake Vincento reaching for his wrist and missing it. Feynriel peered into Carver's eyes. "Something is...off."

"Return to me, son," Vincento called.



“Feynriel,” Carver’s voice shook, and he vainly coughed the fear away. “You’re right. Look at me. If anyone is allowed in your home beyond your parents, then it would be the one you allow *anywhere*.”

Feynriel faltered, and Carver reached a hand out to him in concern. “No, no, you’re the one who’s wrong. Too blue.”

“It’s my eyes,” Carver guided. “They lightened when I passed through puberty. Now they’re Leandra’s colour – Amell blue.”

“Ask your friend to leave,” Vincenzo earnestly suggested.

“Carver is always welcome in my dreams,” Feynriel corrected before he realised what he said. Carver caught him as he stumbled away from Vincenzo in fresh horror. “Maker, I’m dreaming. You’re a demon!”

“Pride,” Carver identified.

The realisation hadn’t come to Feynriel in sudden truth, but in the slow deposition of pebbles on the shores of his mind, the tides of consciousness coaxing them into a larger shape. Vincenzo’s eyes had glowed pride-purple all this time.

Vincenzo abruptly bloated like someone had punched through the doughy layer that was his human body. Then through another angle, and another – until from Vincenzo’s humble form blew up a towering horned giant, long hair and dyed clothing melting together into purple scales. Carver and Feynriel hurriedly backed up as the pride demon stomped electricity up its legs and arms. Carver’s fake image faded away, restoring his original form, Summer Sword and all.

Which he threw squarely between the pride demon’s eyes.

The demon fell, howling, and Carver wasted no time retrieving his sword to behead the beast.

Two strokes. That was all Carver needed.

He had faced bigger.

Feynriel anxiously gripped the edge of Carver’s sleeves. “Maker, the demons are growing more convincing. I don’t know how to tell if I’m awake anymore!”

“It’s not your fault,” Carver assured, sheathing his sword to pat

Feynriel on the back. “The demons want you to lower your guard around them. They’re certainly not helping. Feynriel, breathe. I’m here for the both of you.”

“Me...and...Carver,” Feynriel breathlessly recognised.

Carver held his hand. “Squeeze my hand if you want to sit down.”

One squeeze later, they were sitting at the base of the vhenadahl, a breeze rustling the green canopy overhead. The gentle percussion and Carver’s reassuring presence eventually restored Feynriel to calm breaths. The event could have lasted a minute, but time was irrelevant in the Fade. It had seemed like hours.

Soft footsteps echoed from the rustling leaves, seemingly from all directions before Carver and Feynriel found themselves gazing to the side. From around the alienage’s tree came the form Carver had been wearing moments before. A lanky young man with scuffed knees. Tousled hair. Except in this case, the teen’s eyes were a darker shade of blue, more sky than electric.

Carver twitched to stand up, and Feynriel released their joined hands, letting him. Carver took an uncertain step forward. “...Carver?”

A small smile sprouted on the stranger’s lips, and like Feynriel, the young man embraced Carver without warning.

Carver returned the hug. “Carver, I’m so sorry. I never intended to take your place, to steal your life in the real world from you. Had I known the truth of my situation, I would have started searching for a solution years earlier. How are you feeling? *Have* been feeling? Please don’t say you’ve met Flemeth in the Fade before – or heavens forbid, *Mythal*—”

The original Carver straightened, shaking him once. “Alright, I get it. You’ve prepared everything you wanted to say for this moment, but don’t ruin it. You’re in *my* world now.”

Someone else loosened up despite the fear and wonder buzzing beneath their skin. “Of course, whatever you say.”

The original Carver scrunched his face in disgust as they parted. “I get enough coddling from Mother, don’t you dare add to it.”

“From...Mother?”

“Feynriel,” the original Carver nodded to the blonde, “my personal abomination and I are going to take a stroll around your mind.”

“You treat your friends strangely,” Feynriel shook his head, rising to his feet. “I can shut out demons when I’m aware of myself, but I don’t know when my mind will next wander and slip into a dream. I’m sticking with you two.”

“Whatever.” The original Carver ambled off, quickly followed by his two companions. “Mother, Garrett, Bethany – anyone who dreams of me. I only go to places I know.”

“Places,” someone else echoed, “as in memories. Dreams.”

Their counterpart shrugged. “I’ve never been to the real world, so I can’t give a succinct explanation. I don’t know what I don’t know. That’s literally the Fade; you can only access what you can imagine or what someone who’s with you can imagine, including spirits. You can’t accidentally wander off to new lands.”

“You grew up around our family,” someone else realised, then amended, “the Hawke family. You’re shaped by how they treat you in their dreams – literally, how they unconsciously treat you. Your vocabulary, grasp of societal structures like towns and families, even I’m assuming math: it’s all knowledge that you naturally absorb with exposure. Your self-image matches what they expect from you, and they expect Carver Hawke to know these things and look a certain way.”

“Garrett expects me to be a sullen brat,” Carver grinned. “*His* sullen brat. Bethany expects me to be her quiet other half. Mother, her willful kid who vanished to Denerim wanting to wield a sword. But I’m not a spirit – I won’t perfectly meet expectations. Can’t. I’m a soul, like you.”

“How did you know?” someone else asked. “I only found out because a witch told me.”

“I credit this meddlesome person,” Carver gestured to Feynriel, “and a spirit of Compassion drawn to me since I was a babe. They reasoned that since demons aren’t interested in me, it’s because I can’t act as a gateway into the waking world. However, I’m obviously not a spirit.”

“The reverse of a Tranquil,” Feynriel concluded. “Someone who is severed from the waking world, but somehow still connected to the living. Since the Hawkes behave as if Carver is living in the real world

with them, it means that someone is sustaining his body. I've learned from the Keeper that bodies sustained by spirits or demons ultimately decay, and yet 'Carver' has been growing up and walking around Thedas for twenty-one years now."

"Though I must warn you," Carver amusedly drawled, "Mother, Garrett, and Bethany haven't physically seen 'Carver' since you left for the king's army, and only Garrett has an idea of Carver's current height thanks to his brief encounter with you during the blight. Since then, the Hawkes' impressions of Carver have largely been shaped by their interactions with me in the Fade. Hence my lovably childish appearance."

"And attitude," Feynriel deadpanned.

Someone else winced, massaging their temples. "Carver, you met Feynriel and a spirit of Compassion *accidentally*? I'm hearing that you can imagine places that coincidentally overlap with scenes in Feynriel's dreams."

"Well, you heard wrong," Carver corrected. "I can look at an object in the Fade and give or change its meaning like anyone else, but I can't conjure entire places I've never been to. The fact is, I've realised that people sometimes unconsciously reorganise their memories while they sleep, translating to dreams. One time when Garrett reviewed a day's events while I was with him, I encountered Feynriel dreaming of the same event: his rescue from slavers in Kirkwall. Since then, Feynriel has dreamt of me, allowing me to follow the pull and enter his dreams."

"Which has been a joy," Feynriel remarked, though the sarcasm quickly dissipated. "Really. I would have gone insane dealing with my lucid dreams alone. Carver has been able to keep me grounded. We've learned a lot about the Fade and the waking world together. Although I wish you would stay with me."

Carver snorted at Feynriel's aside. "As much as I like chatting with someone who'll remember our conversation the next time I see them, you can't sleep forever, and I can only stand your face for so long."

"Ouch," Feynriel faked with a grin.

Someone else blinked. "Carver, if everyone who knows you is awake and not dreaming, where do you stay?"

"In the Fade," Carver deadpanned, then elbowed them. "There are

places sustained by enough *meaning* that they subsist beyond any one mind. Spirits of compassion, for example, tend to congregate in the raw Fade. There, I can see the Black City.”

“Are you...safe?” someone else hesitated.

Carver rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mother. The only dangers are demons or unpleasant dreams. I’m smart enough to evade both, though recently the latter has started to include Feynriel. I can accompany him through his lucid dreams, but I can’t kick demons out for him.”

Feynriel looked at Carver. “Well, I’m learning how to recognise them, now. Something about their appearance will be off. Then I can force them out of my dream.”

“Regardless,” Carver snorted, “I also know my way to Compassion’s place, seeing as I’ve been in and out of there since I was a baby.”

“But it’s not a normal life,” someone else cautiously reasoned.

“Interacting with a limited circle of people who won’t remember your conversations, who keep placing expectations on you.... As wondrous as spirits are, they don’t share human logic or instinct. Carver, I’m here because I’m concerned for you.”

At that, everyone quieted. Carver’s voice drifted out of him. “I was with Father in his last moments.”

Someone else felt their throat close with sudden emotion.

“He passed in his sleep,” Carver slowly continued. “We talked, toured the farm together. Father hadn’t been able to walk for weeks leading up to the end. I’m not sure he even knew where he was or why he was there. It was like any other day – any other dream where it was just the two of us. I laughed at his jokes. Then he smiled and...slipped away.”

Someone else’s lips wobbled.

“Thank you for being with him in the real world,” Carver murmured, blue eyes meeting someone else’s. “As I understand it, you left the family farm at one point to train as a soldier, serve your country. Garrett and Bethany couldn’t grasp it, and Mother had an idea, but Father – he knew. He had a way of...accepting things as they were. Whenever I joined him in his dreams, he never treated me beyond what I wanted. No expectations, just love.”

Love.

Someone else wiped their eyes.

“You must have had a family, too,” Carver said.

Someone else nodded, their voice leaving them roughly. “They’re gone, now.”

“I want to return to the real world,” Carver confessed, gazing ahead. “I want to be able to pass away on *my* terms. *Promise me.*”

“I’ll find a way,” someone else swore.

“I mean it.” Carver looked at them sharply. “*My terms*, meaning you can’t die. Before I saw you earlier, I had no confirmation that my life wasn’t just someone else’s dream, and that I wasn’t just a statistical quirk. You have *no idea* how seeing you made me feel. Enough to spur me to hug you. To make me feel alive.”

Carver stopped walking, and everyone paused to meet his pace. At Carver’s offered hand, someone else grasped it, only to be pulled into a hug.

Carver spoke into their shoulder, a wet warmth spreading there. His words carried a tremor. “I’m not slipping into a body at the cost of a friend. Whatever it takes, we’re *both* moving past this alive. *Promise me.*”

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Funny thing about dreams. They never started from the beginning, always throwing its actors into the middle of a scene.

Someone else couldn’t remember their response to the original Carver, or what they talked about afterwards. Personal things, spontaneous questions, feelings. What it meant to love. Someone else could only recognise an unusual sense of contentment and wonder that followed them as they found themselves wandering Clan Sabrae’s camp, Sketch

and Varric murmuring to a Ser Charis about who the demon could be. Then from near the bonfire, Marethari suddenly flared purple, her appearance burning away to reveal a desire demon underneath. Feynriel stood before her with fists determinedly clenched.

“Clever little boy,” the desire demon moaned crossly. “To unveil me so easily, you have no hunger for riches or power. But what of you, Varric Tethras? Haven’t you always wished to be the main character in your story instead of Bartrand?”

Someone else blinked aside at Varric, an idea flashing through their mind like a demon revealing its true form, but into something more pure. Someone else was physically Carver, and they had a mission.

“Tethras,” someone else — no, *Carver* warned.

The instant Varric reached back for Bianca, Sketch struck his staff hard across Varric’s head. The dwarf staggered back, deftly grabbing Bianca and firing with alarming accuracy as he fell. Carver winced as a bolt lanced his thigh. At the same time, the desire demon summoned shade minions, and Feynriel ran away from the battle.

So. Varric betrayed Carver. Of course he did.

Maybe after helping Feynriel with his demons, Carver could demand a deduction of his debt to the merchant prince. As it was, Carver had to contend with Sketch’s shock at his quick disposal of the dwarf, followed by a mana-draining strike at a shade.

“You’re a Templar!?” Sketch spluttered.

The desire demon speared her tail at them, only for Carver to deflect it with Summer Sword and divert the blade’s momentum to slash her torso. Sketch finished off the demon with a bolt of lightning.

Carver wouldn’t have been in as much a hurry to kick Varric out if not for his sword. Vercenne of Halamshiral had engraved his signature near the hilt of all his works, so that a warning – but not full – draw of a sword allowed his signature to peek out. Vercenne’s iconic Empire silhouette with a high waistline and narrow skirt reflected the female fashion of his era, chosen as a signature because Vercenne’s blades were always “as sharp as a noblewoman’s tongue.” The engraved ball gown informed opponents that they faced a warrior worthy of Vercenne’s blades.

Varric expressed little interest in weapons beyond Bianca, but Carver

didn't want to take chances. He had cut Varric down before the man could catch a glimpse of Vercenne's engraving. Then with an explosive smite, Carver had cleared the area of shades.

"I just learned Templar abilities," Carver corrected, stumbling with sudden pain up his leg. "I'm still a soldier."

"Right." Sketch jerked his chin at Carver's grip. "There are mixed reports on that beauty's fate – either lost with her wielder in the blight, or in the hands of the new Ferelden captain. Either way, the king's army wouldn't allow just anyone to keep her." Sketch paused to peer at Carver. "Leliana travelled with the Hero of Ferelden during the blight. Given your acquaintance with her...Maker's breath, those Carver songs are about *you*. Knowing Leliana, likely *all* of them are. So you're...what, a soldier with Templar abilities who is friends with Wardens and the Dalish?"

Carver blinked at his rapid deduction. "Concisely put, yes. You're not Leliana's former ally in the Game for nothing."

"Emphasis on former." Sketch placed his staff's butt on the ground and closed his eyes in concentration. "I can handle my own, but staying in Leliana's vicinity is bad for even my health. No doubt the same is true for you."

Carver sheathed his sword. "I've been reliably told I'm allergic to safety."

Sketch hummed. "Well, I can tell that Feynriel has already woken up with Tethras. What say we follow them?"

X

Varric slowly opened his eyes to the slate blue sky of a coming dawn. The group's dip in the Fade had taken the rest of the night, even if it hadn't felt like it.

He sat up with a groan, working a kink out of his neck. A glance aside confirmed that Isabela had fallen asleep during her watch, and Varric couldn't blame her. It had been a long night for all of them. Around the embers of the bonfire, everyone else gradually woke up, starting with Feynriel. Charis eventually sat up with a hand running through his hair, the usual tension around his eyes gone. The soldier was the most at peace Varric had seen him.

The man had better enjoy it while it lasted. Varric hadn't forgotten



how swiftly Charis had stabbed him in the Fade, even if Varric had failed at providing the support he had promised. It was as if Charis had been jumping at the chance to “kill” Varric. Not a pleasant cocktail with Varric’s other suspicions. Andraste’s tits, Varric would have preferred entering the Fade for the first time with *Garrett* if he had known how cunning demons could be. It was enough that Varric didn’t really know Charis and Sketch.

Varric’s hands were trembling. He didn’t realise how deeply just one brush with a demon had shaken his foundations.

Varric watched with mixed feelings as Charis stood up and gently nudged Isabela awake, offering a hand to lift her up to her feet. Eventually, Marethari and Feynriel bade the group farewell as they continued their journey for a tunnel that would lead to a river. At the end of their path, Charis and Sketch didn’t dwell before the tunnel entrance, candidly shaking hands once before parting ways.

Varric shook his head, mentally scribbling down the night’s events and the confusion roused by them. Feynriel had mistaken Charis for another friend, which had surprised the soldier, so Charis was innocent of that. But what of Charis nearly *pleading* Varric to betray him in the Fade? Or of the whole puzzling matter that was Sketch? Varric only had more questions after tailing Charis through a full adventure. When the group collected the Marauders’ bounties from Aveline, they tiredly agreed to split ways, wash up, and change. Anything to feel normal again.

Just as Varric touched the doorknob to his suite in the Hanged Man, an errand boy called out to him, snatching his elbow for attention.

Varric groaned, nearly snapping at the boy, when the courier whipped out a letter from one of Varric’s contacts.

“They found him, messere! Bertrand Tethras is hiding in his old Hightown estate!”

## Chapter End Notes

Justice and Ser Pounce-a-lot are one, hence Justice being able to grow up into a cat. For obvious reasons, Justice is the dominant personality.

**Spoiler alert:** We’re not going to follow Varric and Garrett find and take down Bertrand. The next chapter starts afterwards!

# Shiny

## Chapter Notes

Just as a general rule, I answer questions for clarification if it doesn't risk spoilers. Otherwise, I'll let you readers theorise together on your own ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Varric tugged the leather string from his hair and collapsed into a chair in his suite, running a hand through his loose locks. Bartrand had been crazy by the time Varric, Garrett, and the others had finally reached him. One of the Tethras-invested mercenary groups had been guarding Bartrand's estate, far removed from the solemn temperance Varric had last known them by — yet compared to Bartrand, they had merely been raving mad.

Bartrand had *lost* it. The, *muttering about songs and growing red lyrium in people like they were mushroom incubators* level of insane. The once proud and eloquent businessman had been grovelling by the time Varric had physically knocked him back to reality, Bartrand scrabbling across the floor to grab Varric's very nice boots and peer up at him like he hung the stars.

"You'll help me, won't you, brother?" Bartrand had breathed.

The older Tethras had once been allergic to the word, and now Varric knew exactly what sort of help Bartrand was grasping for with the last fringes of his sanity.

Varric had heard of illnesses where one might hear voices where there were none, so upon Garrett's advice, Varric had sent Bartrand away to the family beet plantation with people practised in addressing such. With Bartrand's Rivaini contacts recently opening up to Varric, he could keep track of his brother there. Still, no amount of recompense could undo the damage suffered by Bartrand's servants and hired mercenaries. The ones with red lyrium visibly crystallising through their skin had either been unresponsive or begging for relief; there had been no in-between. The rest of the bodies found in Bartrand's estate had barely deserved the label.

Only Hugin had survived the ordeal with both his mind and body intact. As Bartrand's steward who had practically grown up with the

older Tethras, Hugin had stepped forward as a witness to the Merchant's Guild, resulting in the complete erasure of doubt over who owned House Tethras' seat. Varric saw nothing to celebrate in the entire affair. He could only find brief peace in finally being able to sink into his cushions at the place he called home.

Varric had received no answers. Not why Bartrand had stabbed his brother in the back. Not where the lyrium idol, the subject and root of Bartrand's obsession, had vanished to. Not even if Charis was at one point Bartrand's spy — or even more wild, had still behaved as one while Bartrand had been slicing lyrium out of people. Could the inexplicable Charis have enabled Bartrand's deranged behaviour?

Behold, Kirkwall's most informed citizen whose resources amounted to nothing.

Hugin had left to recover with distant relatives in Wycome, no more able to clear Varric's confusion than his own. House Tethras' remaining presence in Kirkwall was now only professional connections, and Varric himself. He was grateful for Garrett's friendship, that he might feel less alone.

On that note, it was odd but relieving to hear that Bethany was prospering as much as one could in Kirkwall's Circle. Given the opportunity to socialise with others absent of fearfully concealing her magic, Bethany was evidently as friendly and outgoing as her brother, and amusedly more straightforward. She and a group of mages had dated the hand bones Emeric had found years ago, and conclusively lined up the bones' discovery with Ninette's disappearance. However, the bones couldn't be matched with Ninette specifically. Emeric's investigation was still denied official support. Varric saw no true loss on that matter, and the real highlight was the fact that Bethany had apparently developed pull in the Circle. To some degree, both mages and Templars listened to her.

The lack of momentum in Emeric's investigation affected only two people who cared enough: Gascard du Puis, who had broken out of jail at the news; and Charis, whose reaction Varric had yet to witness. At the very least, Charis was still raiding sewers.

Ah, speak of the demon, and it shall appear.

Charis passed under Varric's window with purpose in his strides, before faltering to a stop as the soldier deliberated split streets. The foundry district in Lowtown produced Kirkwall's locally-made tools,

while the northern street eventually led to Hightown. *Eventually*, given the street amounted to endless steps punctuated with flat stretches where pedestrians could collapse on a bench or bemoan a wobbly wheel on their cart. Kirkwall benefited from sea trade, not land.

Varric leaned over his window sill. “Shiny!”

Charis’ helmet tilted up. “Tethras.”

“If you need a loo,” Varric teased, “the Hanged Man has a hole.”

“Are you free?” Charis asked.

Varric glanced aside at his crowded writing desk. “I could use a distraction.”

Charis gestured to the northern street. “Use the hole and come down.”

“Good afternoon to you too.”

Varric briskly brushed and tied his hair, equipped Bianca, and descended from his room to greet Charis idling outside the Hanged Man. They strolled up Kirkwall’s infamous calf-builder.

“I passed the Qunari compound on my way out the tavern,” Charis shared, undaunted by the climb, though he did remove his helmet to breathe. “The viscount’s son converted to the Qun recently.”

“Saemus Dumar,” Varric recognised. “Yeah, he’s always been drawn to the horny faith.”

Charis briefly threw him a look. “When I passed by, Dumar had just left the compound to meet with his father in the Chantry, ostensibly by his father’s invitation. Per my experience requesting an audience with Viscount Dumar regarding Sketch, the viscount can’t have such plans at this hour.”

Varric returned the look. “Well at this time, most people grab lunch.”

“Most people aren’t in charge of Kirkwall,” Charis pointed out. “Seneschal Cavin has political lunches booked for the viscount up to the end of the year. Given the office’s unstable influence in Knight-Commander Stannard’s shadow, Viscount Dumar reserves longer hours for private matters as they deserve. Meaning if the Dumar family has heart-to-hearts, they would be at night. I suspect Dumar the younger of being misled.”

“Another conspiracy,” Varric chuckled. “Maybe the kid used his father as an excuse to dip out of the Qunari compound. They’re not exactly known for their conversation.”

Charis looked at him. “Do you honestly believe Dumar would leave for the Chantry so soon after his conversion to the Qun?”

“I can’t speak on matters of faith.” Varric shrugged, but his head twinged at the morsel of truth in Charis’ words. “After we allay your sensitive nerves, you owe me ten more silver. Don’t give me that look, my time is money!”

“You tried to shoot me,” Charis deadpanned.

“It was the *Fade*,” Varric defended. “Maybe what you experienced was just a dream.”

Charis muttered unintelligibly.

“Knight-Lieutenant Emeric’s investigation has stagnated,” Varric shared.

“I heard,” Charis acknowledged. “If the mages had been requested to date the bones sooner, maybe things would’ve changed. As it is, I think I’m finally drawing close.”

“How do you figure?”

“The smell.”

Varric snorted.

“If the serial killer plays with his victims,” Charis justified, “then his hideout would reek.”

Varric nodded along. “His hideout in the sewers, you mean.”

Charis exhaled deeply. “I’ve sacrificed a lot of things for these kinds of investigations. I can’t wait to wash my hands of it. And my body. My clothes.”

“You know, I’ve written you into my stories,” Varric chuckled. “Guardisman Jevlan, a fresh recruit stumbling his way through a tricky murder.”

Charis rose a brow. “Hard in Hightown is already into its third volume.”

"I'm working on the fourth," Varric revealed. In a dramatic plot twist, Jevlan had been one of the protagonist's enemies all along. "You read my serials?"

"The dockworkers gossip about it," Charis dismissed.

"So what do you do in your free time?"

Charis blinked at the question.

"*Maferath's trousers*, Shiny," Varric denied. "What do you do at home in Ferelden? Do you have any siblings?"

Charis shrugged. "One older and one younger."

"Ah, the middle child," Varric said. "Often forgotten unless they screw up."

"I screw things up."

Varric snorted. "Who, you? I bet you sleep with a rule book under your pillow."

Charis shook his head. "I prioritise work above everything else. I haven't taken a holiday for myself since...hm, I was thirteen years old."

Varric nearly choked. "That's a long time to burn both ends of the candle."

"I've hurt my brother because of it," Charis stated. "I'm sure my mother and sister, too."

Varric chuckled. "This might be a bold move for you, but have you considered taking a break for yourself? Doing nothing for a week — or a month? Who knows, maybe you'll find a glowing personality."

Charis smirked. "Like yours?"

"Look at that, a smile!"

They eventually intercepted Saemus at a bench, catching his breath on his way to the Chantry. Indeed, the runaway noble had received a letter falsely signed by Marlowe Dumar, requesting a private audience in one of the Chantry's isolated chambers. The letter specified to leave the Qunari and their swords out of the meeting. Saemus explained that outside of war, qunari only drew their swords or spears for the

sake of threatened viddathari – dwarves, elves, or humans who followed the Qun. When Varric, Charis, and Saemus approached the designated room in the Chantry, Charis' suspicions were validated with Mother Petrice's sudden ambush against Saemus.

In one move, Charis drew a dagger, pushed Saemus aside with the same arm, and blocked Petrice's jab. Varric shot Petrice in the leg, sending her crashing to the ground. A second bolt dissuaded her from snatching her dropped dagger. Drawn by the noise, Revered Mother Elthina walked in that moment and denounced Petrice, firmly subscribing her to the meditation of the ten candles. It was the equivalent to locking oneself up in a sparsely-furnished room to indefinitely fast and pray with only candles and the Maker for company.

After walking Saemus back to the Qunari compound, Varric and Charis snuck into the latter's tavern, not eager to witness the viscount or the Qunari react to Elthina or Saemus' reports respectively. It was a political nightmare, but nothing beyond that for the Qunari, suspected Charis. The horned giants weren't going to seek bloody retribution due to their code. However, the City Guard was going to have their hands full with litigations trying to arrest a cleric for crimes against a citizen of the Qun and Kirkwall, committed in the politically neutral grounds of the Chantry.

Charis admitted he wasn't planning to step forward as a witness. He had only meant to rescue Saemus from a trap.

Varric placed a hand on his chest. "Why Shiny, here I thought you would seize this opportunity to beat three different groups over their heads with a rule book."

Charis snorted. "You know, thirteen year-old and fifteen year-old boys don't have stark visual differences."

Varric rose a brow. "Dumar is hardly in his teenage years anymore."

"I had taken advantage of it," Charis continued slowly, "to sneak into the king's army just under the legal age. By the time anyone deigned to verify my background, I was already completing difficult tasks for the army."

"Shit," Varric eloquently reacted. "Shiny."

Charis' lips twitched. "I've had goals for this life since I was a child. Joining the king's army is just one step. What I did to join isn't much

of a secret, but it proves that I'm not always by the book, Tethras. When I have a target, I *will* hit it."

Varric groaned into his hand. "You're not giving up on the 'serial killer,' are you."

"Smart dwarf."

"Impossible human."

X

That was the last Varric saw Charis.

As if the sewers had abruptly swallowed the soldier, Charis had completely vanished with his tavern room paid up for the month but left untouched for the past two weeks. Aveline suggested that Charis had left town without grabbing his things in his room, opting to travel light. Isabela offered the idea that Charis had finally eloped with his Antivan beau from the Hightown market. The matter was so strange that Varric updated Garrett and the rest on his interactions with Charis, the inexplicably strange soldier whom Varric wouldn't be surprised to learn had disappeared to Orzammar.

Given Varric's suspicions about Charis before, no matter how light, the group resolved to search for Charis together. Garrett decided it for everyone when he expressed concern for Varric's safety. Thus, all of Garrett's friends ended up combing Kirkwall at night with Varric squarely in the middle of their party.

"This is my first time hearing of a Charis," Merrill commented. "Clan Sabrae has few friends outside the clan, and only one beyond the Dalish."

"Indeed," Sebastian remarked, "and we're travelling with him."

The Starkhaven prince didn't bat an eye at traversing the city's sewers. He leapt at any chance to do good, and around Garrett, one had many opportunities. Particularly taking down unsavoury characters.

Merrill made a negative sound in the back of her throat. "Alright, two beyond the Dalish. One is Hawke, the other is Carver."

Garrett stumbled as always at his brother's name. Unfortunately, the name was as common as the songs spilling out of taverns and brothels. Fenris wordlessly placed a hand on Garrett's shoulder in comfort. In



contrast, Anders inexplicably groaned as if having been similarly ambushed. Justice purred from where the feline perched on the mage's shoulder.

"Hawke is more of *my* friend," Merrill finished with a mutter.

"What did this Carver do?" Isabela leaned in. "Steal away one of your clan's beloved members?"

Garrett choked, successfully cheered up. "That is *not* what I did with Merrill. She came on her own!"

"That's what she said," half of the party reacted.

Everyone grinned.

Even Sebastian, though he was likely simply happy that his friends were happy.

"That is what I said," Merrill continued, making Varric question once more if she was intentionally outwardly oblivious just to see everyone's reaction. Varric didn't want to stereotype outside of the pages of his books, but blood mages were *devious*. Varric wanted in on her humour. "Anyway, Carver was a human who risked his life to help our halla breeder, Theron, recover from his taint long enough to join the Grey Wardens in Ostagar. Keeper Marethari has been thankful ever since."

"Theron *Mahariel*?" Aveline asked. "The Champion of Ostagar? Your clan boasts impressive skill, Merrill."

"Why thank you."

"Regardless of attitude."

"They can be close-minded," Merrill purposefully misunderstood.

"I know little of how Charis understands the Qun as he does," Fenris added. "It isn't hard to learn of their ways peripherally through Tal-Vashoth, or by passing through land the Qunari have influence in. Besides Par Vollen and Seheron, there are a number of qunari east and south of the Imperium – yet, those *are* far from Ferelden. Is it possible your soldier has visited such places before?" At Varric's disclaimer, Fenris grunted. "Alternatively, he could be a Ben-Hassrath: a qunari spy. The Ariqun often sends viddathari Ben-Hassrath to southern assignments where they can be mistaken for a normal dwarf, elf, or

human.”

Isabela’s blanched. “I’m sorry, I could have been spending the past few months with a qunari *spy*!? When did you want to share this, Fenris!?”

“When Tethras told me everything he knew of Charis,” Fenris easily returned, “just now.”

Varric raised his first finger. “Don’t I have more of a right to panic?”

“This is your fault.” Isabela threw her hands in the air. “Play Wicked Grace with the mysterious pretty boy, why don’t you, try to learn all his secrets.”

“Well,” Varric admitted, “that was several weeks *after* I met him.”

Garrett and the rest of the party deadpanned. “That wasn’t very smart.”

“In hindsight.” Varric ran a hand down his face.

Anders sighed. “Does that mean we can leave the sewers, now?”

Everyone unanimously agreed. The stench had begun to grow unbearable. When they surfaced in a foundry alley, they stumbled into the middle of a fight. The very person Varric was searching for stood with his back to them, the streets’ distant torchlight casting an orange halo around his black hair and illuminating the golden greatsword in his hands. At Charis’ feet was a frazzled Leandra desperately untying twine binds around her wrists and ankles, and down the alley in front of Charis stood a grey-haired man stabbing himself with a bladed staff and summoning demons.

Varric spluttered, hands whipping for Bianca. “*Shiny*!?”

Charis turned at Varric’s voice, shock splitting through his distracted expression. “What are you *doing here*?”

Garrett scoffed with equal shock. “I *live* here!?”

“I mean in this *street*, Garrett.”

“I could ask you the same thing!”

Leandra finally freed her wrists, now working on her ankles. “Would you boys stop fighting?”

Garrett and Charis clicked their tongues in unison. “Sorry, Mother.”

A bolt went flying from Bianca into a shade demon while Varric’s jaw dropped in delayed reaction. “M-Mother!?”

The evident blood mage down the alley struck his staff on the ground, groaning. “You can’t keep me from my beloved!”

Charis responded by catching a demon’s body with his blade, which shone white before *exploding* the demon in half. The golden blade swung through the demon’s remains and twirled to sever another demon’s head. By the time Varric was firing Bianca at the demon past it, he realised that the man with him wasn’t Ser Charis the errand boy, but *Carver blighting Hawke*.

Who was *not*, as the Hawkes remembered, a short soldier with an inferiority complex.

Aside from what Varric *hadn’t* detected from Carver, how could anyone harbour a sense of inferiority while tearing through an army of demons like they were pap—— *Maker’s Breath!*

Varric ducked as the blood mage’s arm sailed past him above. In quick succession, Carver swung his sword over his head through incoming demons behind him and stepped past the blood mage, momentum tugging his sword through his opponent’s neck. The blood mage’s headless body hit the floor at the same time as the staff that had been in its severed arm.

Carver flicked his sword once of blood.

Fenris knelt near Leandra and offered her a hand. “Lady Hawke.”

“Thank you, Fenris.” Leandra gratefully replied as she stood up shedding her restraints.

An arcane bolt suddenly shot down the alley. Varric turned to see Garrett deflect it with a wave of shields, twist his wrist, and jerk someone at the end of the alley by their ankles, swiftly dragging them to Garrett and Carver’s feet by an invisible force.

Garrett and Carver pointed their weapons down at one frazzled Gascard du Puis.

Carver turned. “I was here first.”

“He tried to kill *me!*” Garrett retorted.

“You lowered your guard.”

Gascard clutched his staff, a length of laquered wood embedded with blood-red crystals. Hysterical Orlesian spilled out of the comte’s lips. “You don’t understand, who knows what secrets lie in that woman’s body from the moment Quentin touched her!”

Garrett’s brows furrowed. “What?”

Carver maintained his grip on his sword. “That blood mage was du Puis’ necromancy teacher from Starkhaven’s Circle. Quentin abducted Mother and tried to smuggle her into his lair where he could combine her with body parts from his other victims and resurrect his late wife.”

Gascard stuttered. “How do you know that!?”

Garrett glowered at Gascard. “He tried to ruin Mother *twice over?*”

Gascard huffed despite his position. “Quentin was going to achieve true reincarnation. The height of blood magic! I could have persuaded him to teach me – but instead I must study his victims and notes wherever I can find them!”

Carver shook his head. “You’ll never find his lair. Next on my list is smiting that hole to oblivion.”

Garrett’s brows flicked up, not following the rapid exchange. “Hello?”

Gascard snapped. “I have nothing to say to either of you!”

A bolt suddenly sprouted in Gascard’s throat.

Garrett and Carver slowly turned to look at Varric, who lowered Bianca. “What? You were going to do that, right?”

“Varric,” Garrett remarked. He had mistakenly called Varric by his first name as a Ferelden fresh off the boat, and they hadn’t minded since then.

“Tethras,” Carver simultaneously deadpanned.

“That’s my name,” Varric grinned at the stereo, “don’t wear it out.”

“*Well, well.*” Smooth baritone from the shadows suddenly sprung everyone to high alert, encircling Leandra with drawn weapons while

Garrett and Carver peered ahead. From the alley's battered doors and windows spilled out toned men and women clad in ragged armour, a painted bear scarcely visible on their equipment. Down the alley, the source of the voice stepped into view. "If it isn't the little bird. You've been searching for us all the way from Denerim."

Carver murmured without looking at Garrett. "Take Mother and run."

Garrett sharply turned on him. "You *better* be joking."

The hostile crowd surrounding the party gripped their weapons with military ease. "Is this a family reunion we see?"

Carver frowned at the person coordinating them. "Let these people leave, Howe legion. They have nothing to do with this."

The leader snarled. "You killed Lord Thomas. We don't care *who* we kill getting to you."

Carver scoffed. "Rendon Howe sent Lord Thomas to his demise himself. If your master wants me dead, he should learn from the last two Antivan Crows who tried." Carver tilted his blade once, and the ambushers all flinched. "This is your only warning."

A legion member hesitantly puffed their chest. "Don't pretend. You're here under a different name, wearing someone else's armour. We all know you're not here on official business."

"You're right," Carver suddenly agreed. "If you hurt my family, I would ordinarily knock you all out and arrest you. But as you said... I'm *off-duty*."

As if on cue, Carver ducked at the same time Garrett whipped his staff out, slamming the strangers ahead together as if the air around them had suddenly sucked upwards. Carver darted forward with a low swing, and hot blood splashed against the walls.

Madness tore up the alley, then the streets around it. Varric barely kept track of his kill count while Garrett and Carver made short work of any obstacles in their way. The onslaught of enemies reminded Varric of the Deep Roads expedition where darkspawn and rock wraiths had flooded from all sides, stealing any moment to breathe. Isabela could be heard cackling. Merrill tossed words with her stone fists that vaguely resembled, "Defend yourselves" and "please." Varric sometimes glimpsed blue flashes of Fenris covering Garrett's back as always, and Anders doing what he did best: goading, fireballs, and

occasional healing. Despite Justice's remarks, the feline could be trusted with Anders' blind spots and providing general emotional support.

Aveline, Sebastian, and Varric pressed together around Leandra in a tight defence or as long-range support for the party. Clouds eventually parted from the moon, revealing their quieted surroundings now streaked black with blood. Varric panted, catching his breath.

Ahead, Carver pointed his sword at a former Howe soldier near his feet. "Where is Rendon Howe?"

Spit flew. "Kill me."

"Your family is waiting for you in Amaranthine," Carver struck low. "Either say your farewells in Ferelden, or die in the slums of a foreign country."

The traitor flinched, her internal conflict filling the space of heartbeats. "...There's an Orlesian vacation home in the Vimmark Mountains."

"Château Haine," Carver deduced.

"It's a fortress," the fallen soldier spitefully added. "You'll never get in."

"Let me worry about that." Carver sheathed his sword and grabbed the woman's arm to haul her up to her feet.

Garrett interrupted, dazed by the night's revelations. "You're going to...arrest her?"

Aveline stepped in. "The City Guard will jail this criminal until she must stand trial in Ferelden. As the soldier said...he's off-duty." Meaning Carver wouldn't have to leave as soon as Garrett had seen him.

Garrett's conflicted gaze melted a notch. "Thanks, Aveline."

His last syllable was stolen by an eruption of fire from the direction of the docks.

## Chapter End Notes

Poor Garrett. "Confused" is too mild a word to describe him, hee hee.

Next up, the Qunari invasion!

# Vanguard

## Chapter Notes

A longer chapter than usual ahead. I got inspired!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Garrett panted. “Why would the Qunari invade *now*?”

Carver clicked his tongue behind Garrett. “Not the Qunari, just the ones from the docks. They’ve been cut off from the main body for too long, though this is sooner than expected.”

Leandra and Garrett’s friends ran behind him as he raced for Lowtown’s western street leading to the docks. Quentin had apparently abducted Leandra on her way to Gamlen’s house for their weekly visit, and Leandra feared that Gamlen could have peeked outside his home in search of her, placing him in the qunari’s warpath. Aveline had already split off to toss the Howe traitor in jail and sync with her guardsmen and the viscount on Kirkwall’s military response.

A hysterical mob passed Garrett, nearly concealing the wave of qunari charging in the direction of Garrett and his armed party.

*CLANG!*

Garrett tilted his head from a thrown spear that struck a building behind him, bringing his staff up just in time to block a sword’s downward slash. Had Garrett not intuitively sheathed his staff and hands in shields, the qunari attacking him would have already split Garrett in half. As it was, the horned giant’s eyes betrayed quicksilver surprise at Garrett’s reflexes and strength, right before the end of Garrett’s staff lit up and fried the qunari with a ruthless crack of lightning.

*BOOM!*

Garrett briskly spun his head to check on his party, as he usually refrained from such spells while in their proximity. Fortunately, they either weren’t turned stupid by the deafening thunder, or were already fighting stupid. No thoughts, head empty, just the way Garrett liked it. To the side, a qunari’s spear stitched the air between himself and Carver with failed contact.



The oxman snarled. “Bas! You fight like a qunari!”

Carver retorted, “Good. I was trained by one.”

*Bang!*

The qunari struck again at Carver’s torso, only for Carver’s sword to steal in at an angle with less strength, disproportionately blowing the qunari’s spear away. The exchange was lightning-fast, no pun intended, as if Carver knew where to hit in the last second to redirect his opponent’s energy.

Another qunari stole Garrett’s focus, and he repaid them with a quick death.

“There’s too many of them!” Garrett barked, lighting up a qunari behind him without looking.

His friends wordlessly regrouped in a single step, familiar with Garrett’s communication and ready to retreat and attack from a better position. Despite Garrett’s ability, he preferred to give ground if it meant reducing risks for his party. While he could go solo and wreak havoc, he would no doubt end up exposing his magic for all of blighting Kirkwall to see *and* tiring himself before a big fight. There always was one.

“I’ll take Mother,” Carver stated from his shoulder.

“Go. I’ll find Uncle Gamlen.”

“No,” Carver cut down another qunari, “the Arishok will be leading the charge for the Viscount’s Keep in order to steal control of the city. Then he’ll be able to force everyone to turn or burn. If *you* think there are too many enemies, then the head of the snake *must* be cut off before it outgrows us all.”

Garrett snorted. “I’m flattered that I’m your measurement for when things are truly screwed, brother.”

“I’ll take Mother to Gamlen’s house,” Carver decided non sequitur. “She’s safer there than risking the open northern street. Then I’ll find Uncle Gamlen.”

Garrett grabbed Carver’s wrist. Fenris and Merrill advanced on the qunari in front of him, buying him time. “Uncle’s a sluggard who’s either in a corner of the Blooming Rose or lost in a barrel

somewhere.”

“You don’t know that——“

“Don’t leave Mother’s side.”

Garrett knew his grip was tight. He usually couldn’t feel his own strength, but when it came to his reticent, diffident loner of a brother, Garrett especially could never curb his emotions. His grip was always tight. It seemed that otherwise, Carver would float off the earth as a dream meant only to be forgotten, and Garrett would have lost him without trying.

Carver was wearing that same expression now. The one that travelled from Carver’s eyes straight to Garrett’s, and yet saw through him to a horizon beyond the world in which they stood.

Carver bowed his head, the fringe of his black hair covering his eyes. “...In time.”

Garrett tilted his head. “What was that?”

Carver peeked upward and slipped something out of his pouch to offer to Garrett. “If you bring this to the Arishok in time, he might leave with it before he can kill Kirkwall’s government.”

Isabela jerked forward with a slit of a qunari’s throat. “How do you have that!?”

As Garrett accepted a weathered tome, Carver merely nodded to himself in thought, and for a breath, Garrett was standing in front of a muddy little boy contemplating a stick in his hand. A burst of complicated affection abruptly swelled in Garrett’s chest, surprising him. Carver would hate it if Garrett wrestled him into a crushing hug like when they had been kids. Garrett was bursting with love and anger – the faces of passion – and they only fueled his confusion, but now wasn’t the time.

“The Arishok might appreciate a fruit basket more,” Garrett quipped.

“That’s the Tome of Koslun, the Qunari’s sacred scripture,” Carver shared. “I can’t tell you how many ‘Sam’s’ I tracked down before finally stealing it from a smuggler in a dark foundry.”

Garrett’s brows furrowed. “The one near where you encountered Quentin?”

“The same. I’ve been busy.”

“Got it. We’re heading north!” Garrett raised his voice for the party.  
“Merrill, take my mother with Carver.”

“On it,” Merrill replied.

“I’ll search for your uncle,” Sebastian offered.

At Garrett’s assent, the prince nimbly shot arrows on his way to the docks. Merrill summoned rock armour around herself and defended Leandra as the two women and Carver split for Gamlen’s home. At least Garrett could count on Brute to defend Bodahn, Sandal, and Orana in the Hawke estate, though considering the merchant pair, the three probably wouldn’t need it.

Suddenly, Isabela swiftly snatched the book from Garrett’s hands and darted past a wall of flames, leaving Garrett and the rest with the qunari.

“Isabela!” Garrett cried out, astonished.

“I need this to save my life!” the raider’s voice echoed back. “Sorry, but I’m not you!” She vanished into the shadows like a thought.

“Blood and flames,” Garrett gaped. He hadn’t felt this lost since hugging the mast of the ship that had brought him to Kirkwall, the endless sea and sky swirling together with nausea. “Forget it, we’re saving the viscount!”

The rest of Garrett’s party unquestioningly agreed and followed behind him as he pivoted for Hightown. They fended off qunari, Qun converts, and random Carta at their heels and in their way, until finally they stormed the steps to the Viscount’s Keep. Knight-Commander Meredith and First Enchanter Orsino simultaneously swept in on either side of him with sharp reprovals at his lack of strategy.

“Hawke, you can’t just——!”

Garrett scrunched his face. “Stand with me, or stand aside!”

He unleashed a massive telekinetic blast at the qunari blocking the keep’s front doors. The oxmen scattered like tossed rag dolls and the doors splintered as they were blown back. There was no chance at stealth now — with Garrett’s enemies or his allies.

Meredith breathed. “*Maker*——“

Orsino interjected, “—*Maker* bless those who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter. Watch the left!”

Meredith’s Templars raised their shields against a hail of spears. “Knight-Commander, get down!”

Garrett and his party were still running. “You’ve got it!” he tossed back encouragingly.

A flash of magic from Orsino and his mages answered him. Hopefully Orsino hadn’t brought Bethany along in his mission to stop the qunari. Garrett hadn’t seen her, so she was probably in the Gallows defending it alongside Knight-Captain Cullen. To Garrett’s understanding, an enchanter and knight-captain were almost close in rank, or whatever.

*Thump.*

Garrett and his friends slowed down as a qunari sent the head of a trembling, kneeling nobleman flying, then rolling to a stop at Garrett’s feet. “...Shit.”

The Arishok and several qunari paced the red carpet of the viscount’s throne room, where half of Kirkwall’s nobility cowered. On the steps to the throne itself, Aveline was lying down clutching her ribs with slain or unconscious guardsmen around her. Marlowe Dumar lied unresponsive among them, likely knocked out from having tripped on his robes down the steps and hitting his head while trying to flee.

“We offer this choice,” the Arishok bellowed, “accept the Qun, or die!”

“*Shit*,” Garrett emphasised, practically singing while he pointedly turned. Garrett had picked up the swear from Varric. “*Fenris, any insights here?*”

A flat stare answered him, before Fenris stepped forward. “Arishok—”

The horned giant cut him off, stepping over Aveline, her guardsmen, and Marlowe to meet Garrett and his party on the throne floor. “Shanedan, Hawke. I expected you. Maraas toh ebra-shok – you alone are basalit-an. This is what respect looks like, bas!” The Arishok abruptly barked at the government officials and scattered nobles pushed into the room’s corners. “Some of you will never earn it!”

“Right,” Garrett cut in. “Greetings. Your invasion is ill-timed,

Arishok.”

Varric shot him a look at the subtlety.

“Shanedan means ‘I’ll listen to you,’” Fenris helpfully whispered from Garrett’s side.

The Arishok hefted a double-bladed axe over his shoulder, another dangling from his other hand. “You know I cannot withdraw, basalit-an. How would you resolve this conflict?”

Any other day, Garrett would shoot the breeze with the Arishok about how Kirkwall sucked and what either of them could do about it. The Arishok liked switching documents about to be stolen; Garrett preferred driving Tal-Vashoth out of the city. However, the blood of Kirkwall’s military was currently staining Garrett’s shoes.

Garrett cleared his throat. “Your society’s mind, body, and soul agreed to send you and your soldiers here. Given your society is a living entity, would it not require another such agreement before one may sweep through Thedas and identify the faithful?”

The Arishok’s barrel-sized chest rumbled in displeasure. “You claim to know what the Arigena and the Ariqun would agree to.”

“The three of you already sent you on a task,” Garrett pointed out, “*separate* from conquering foreign lands. If the task denies you Par Vollen until its completion, is it not by nature as grave as foreign conquest? I only ask you to consider that you don’t know the – uh – Arigena and Ariqun’s minds either.”

The Arishok took great offence to that.

Fenris’s mouth flew while Garrett stepped forward to square off with the Arishok, who had immediately lowered his axe and moved to stomp in. “Arishokost! Qun-anaam ebra-toh. You have granted this man basalit-an, and by this admission, he has the right to challenge you.”

“A duel to the death,” the Arishok grumbled without breaking eye contact with Garrett. “The duty that binds the defeated ends.”

Garrett had no duty to claim off the top of his head, but he recognised that he was an honorary qunari. Or something. “The soldiers with you will return to Par Vollen?”

“Should I lose,” the Arishok stated flatly.

Garrett fixed his hand on his staff, resembling the qunari soldiers watching the exchange with spears in their hands. “What duty binds you, exactly?”

“Returning the Qun as written by Ashkaari Koslun back home to Par Vollen,” the Arishok answered. “A thief stole it four years ago, and I have since chased her to Kirkwall’s shores.”

Maker’s breath. *Isabela?* She couldn’t have trusted Garrett with helping her? They could have found a way to – to sneak the tome to Castillon, then sic the Qunari on the slave-smuggling merchant. They could have come up with *anything* in the past three years.

But Garrett couldn’t send the Qunari out of Kirkwall on Isabela’s tail, no matter how much he trusted the raider to slip out of their grasp. Garrett couldn’t truly ensure her safety.

“Arishok,” Garrett breathed, “let’s dance.”

“Meravas!” the Arishok stepped back, twirling the axes in his hands. “So it shall be.”

No sooner had everyone cleared the throne room’s main floor did the Arishok charge, closing what seemed like half of the distance between them in one lunge. Garrett’s life flashed before his eyes as he reflexively pivoted aside and grabbed his staff with both hands. The Arishok had rushed in horns-first, so neither of his axes were raised in a stab that could become a block.

Garrett quickly learned that this didn’t count as an opening. The staff held across Garrett’s body tilted forward to strike the Arishok’s temple, only for the axe on Garrett’s side to jab out in passing. Garrett caught the incredible force with his staff, backpedalling to recover with a flash of shields.

Nausea briefly kicked in. Though Garrett had managed to outwardly harden himself with magic in time, his insides had still felt the muted blow.

There was no time to think.

**BANG!**

Garrett glancingly caught an axe with his chest plate; then another

with a burst of fire that deflected the weapon in a sudden temperature change; then another with the tips of his hair. A cut opened across his nose and his brain rattled in his skull despite cleanly dodging the blow. The Arishok's arms seemed to drag the very air with them. Garrett leaned sideways while stumbling back, pushing his centre of gravity away from the audience to avoid dragging them into the battle, and the Arishok's axe unsurprisingly found him.

The ground beneath the Arishok suddenly burst with light. Garrett had scraped his staff against the floor as he had retreated to plant a paralysis glyph, and for a heartbeat, the triggered glyph held against the Arishok's strength. In the next heartbeat, Garrett was already lunging past the Arishok's raised arm and whipping his staff up with a blade of fire.

*TWANG.*

*KRSHHHH!*

The Arishok and Garrett both staggered. The actual blade of Garrett's staff had grated against the Arishok's body paint as if the dye was solid rock – however, his blade had still cracked open the Arishok's unpainted chin. Garrett's fire spell had then cauterised the wound just as quickly, leaving burn marks as a souvenir. He paid for the success with his wrists. Having expected his staff to cut through skin, Garrett had thrown his back into the upward slash and found himself slicing a brick wall from the wrong angle.

Against Garrett's will, his staff flew out of his palms for the ceiling. Garrett one-handedly caught the last third of his staff by sheer reflex. He detachedly noticed the smell of the Arishok's burned hair.

*"Ghh...!"*

Garrett jerked his staff down and essentially caned the Arishok's forearm. Garrett's staff and one of the Arishok's axes clattered to the ground.

The Arishok finished recovering from the blow to his chin.

***"Rahhhh!"***

Garrett tripped backwards onto his rear, weaponless. He hastily twisted aside an axe that cratered the ground. The Arishok then snatched him by the throat and picked him up off the ground, squeezing. Hard. Aiming to break Garrett's neck.

Black spots danced in Garrett's vision, then a wave of red.

*Bloodlust* kicked in.

Metal gauntlets melted into Garrett's skin as he summoned a concentrated heat that *seared through* the Arishok's painted arm holding him up. The qunari cried out as slag ran down his limb, unwittingly dropping Garrett. Just as quickly, the Arishok refocused. His pain had only lasted for as long as his sense of touch had stayed intact.

**BANG!**

Another crater opened behind Garrett while he dove past the Arishok's legs. The Arishok wasn't giving Garrett time to think, and indeed, Garrett didn't even try. He moved on instinct.

Just the way he liked it.

Garrett rolled up to his feet and pivoted, meeting the Arishok's axe at his back with his staff.

The room exploded.

**BOOM!**

Lightning opened up the roof, branching up for the sky like a tree. The throne room's glass windows shattered in a ripple of displaced air. Garrett felt the last of his gauntlets melt away into nothing. When the ringing in his ears subsided, he could see the others in the throne room dazedly stand up, shaking away the same sound in their heads.

There wasn't much left of the ceiling or the carpet, much less the Arishok. A horrific, dimensional stain on the ground and a scorched scent in the air marked where Garrett's opponent had taken the full brunt of Garrett's Fade-driven power.

Despite it all, Garrett's staff remained unscathed. He had intuitively sheathed his staff and physical body with shields perfectly balanced against his offensive lightning spell – a sorcerous dichotomy usually impossible, according to the late Malcolm Hawke. The man had called Garrett a born genius. Malcolm had often lamented that Garrett couldn't grow up with official magical guidance.

So much for discretion. At this point, *all* of Kirkwall knew Garrett was an apostate.



Then applause and cheering rolled in like thunder.

“Hawke did it!”

“He saved us from the Qunari!”

“The Champion of Kirkwall!”

Garrett numbly turned around to look at his friends. What was he there for, again? The fight had sucked the intelligence out of him. He could vaguely see his friends level deadpan looks at his obvious thoughts. Meanwhile, Orsino, Meredith, and their forces filtered into the throne room, and the remaining qunari unhesitatingly left without a word.

The Knight-Commander approached Garrett and crossed her arms. “So it is. The Champion of Kirkwall.”

The room erupted in celebration. “*Maker be praised!*”

“*The Champion!*”

X

“So the mail backed up, and *you* told *Teyrn Loghain* to fix it?”

“No, the matter was *brought up* to Teyrn Loghain, who *had* me fix it.”

“Which occupied you from writing back to Bethany for a year once you found out?”

“Months. Leading up to Ostagar.”

Garrett stilled. “You were there.”

Carver’s gaze slipped away.

“In what capacity?” Garrett’s playful voice flatlined. When the silence stretched, Garrett bounced his knee. “You know the rules, brother. I ask a question, and if you don’t want to answer truthfully, you take a drink of the Hanged Man’s specialty.”

Carver stared balefully at the wooden mug. “So...speak, or die.”

“You’re stalling.”

Carver had managed to evade a long-awaited conversation with

Garrett while half of Kirkwall wanted the champion's attention. The city-state was a hot mess after the abandoned Qunari invasion, and everyone wanted a reliable public figure to assure them that they would be fine. At least Carver's early research into urban coastal repairs had finally found its way into the Viscount's Keep as originally intended, after all these years. Then there was the matter of Isabela, who had apparently returned to Garrett's front door and grudgingly spilled her confessions. Garrett had stuck himself to Isabela's side until the two had predictably renewed their friendship.

Carver had only managed to privately persuade Isabela to let Carver hold on to the Tome of Koslun by revealing that he had connections to the Postal Service, the same organisation that had fired at the Siren's Call for transporting slaves. Isabela's hands had trembled in remembered fear as she had handed the tome to Carver under the gaze of one of his Antivan contacts. The female merchant had reluctantly played the part of Carver's superior whom he would ostensibly give the tome to in private to preserve the Postal Service's secret smuggling methods.

Apparently, the Postal Service was a bane to slave-dealing merchants, even affluent figures like Castillon, and brushing paths with an authoritative figure like Carver's "contact" was rare and unwanted for most raiders regardless of their choice product. Later on, Isabela had warned Carver that associating himself with even "ethical" syndicates was dangerous for kids like him, no matter how skilled he was. Carver had managed to insist to Garrett and his friends at large that any encounters Carver might have had with Antivan Crows were coincidental and over by sheer luck. His remarks to the Howe criminals had been bluffs.

Now it was Carver's turn to sit in the chair. Per Garrett's request – read: command – he, his friends, and Carver were all gathered around a table in the Hanged Man for "friendly conversation."

Starting with cross-examining the letter Carver had sent.

At least Leandra was resting at home with Gamlen at her side. The younger Amell had taken to fussing over his sister ever since she had been abducted by Quentin. Carver's conversation with his mother had been a quiet thing snatched between bursts of qunari attacks at Gamlen's front door. Carver had also updated Merrill on how Theron was doing last Carver knew. The Hawke estate now temporarily housed Gamlen, just until the city finished rebuilding his home. Under Leandra's stern gaze, Carver had reluctantly moved his things into the

guest room next to Gamlen's.

Hopefully once Kirkwall's upper echelon settled down, Carver could check on Bethany through Leandra. The Amell name carried such importance that even now, Leandra and Gamlen were able to physically visit Bethany in the Gallows, despite Kirkwall's Circle laws. It was a bitter fact to accept that Garrett – the city champion and Bethany's own *brother* – couldn't see his sister just because he didn't possess the long-established influence of a born Amell.

Carver sighed. His breath bounced off the surface of his drink, and the air that greeted him was vile. "Vanguard."

Garrett shot up from his chair. "You were seventeen! A new recruit!" He pointed and swung his arms in all manners of angry shock, barely missing the top of Fenris's head, while Varric was safe on Garrett's other side. Garrett wasn't done, and slammed his hands on the table, rattling Varric's sitting mug. "They knew it was a blight, and they didn't think of the taint? Did you— Were you—?"

"Vanguard for the *mag*es," Carver swiftly corrected in the midst of Garrett's tirade. He had to repeat himself until the bartender shot Garrett a look, and the mage's volume dipped to one more acceptable for a bar fight. Carver continued over Garrett, who eventually calmed to a tensely vibrating state while dancing the line of listening and reacting. "I was in the back line. I was hardly a new recruit by then. Many others of my class were already promoted ahead of me in the years leading to Ostagar. No, I was never tainted."

Garrett was still standing hunched over the table. "Mother thought you were dead until we received a letter from the king. *One year later.*"

"It was a busy year."

"You had to wait for the king to write to our family?"

"Busy for all of us."

At least Aden had been smart enough to not withhold a royal letter from Gamlen's mail. Given it had been one of many token letters to soldiers' families, Cailan had fortunately failed to detail Carver's status.

Garrett slumped back in his chair and crossed an ankle over his knee. His eyes, though swirling with emotion, were piercing. Whenever

Garrett did manage to curb the famous Hawke mage expressiveness in him, he was uncomfortably perceptive. He was a simpleton to anyone not sharp enough to search and see beyond his outward energy.

Carver bowed his head. He could endeavour to keep to himself, to conceal many things from bards, qunari, Crows, and knights. Yet by some natural magnetism, Carver couldn't hide what mattered from Garrett for long unless he put a distance between them. Now, he had no choice.

“Carver?”

“I...didn't hear a question.”

Garrett wasn't frowning, which only drew out his resemblance with an impatient Malcolm Hawke. “What had you busy for twelve months?”

Carver was allergic to excessive attention. Garrett alone was enough to stand in for ten people, but the two brothers were also in the presence of Garrett's closest friends. One of whom Carver had been avoiding eye contact with, despite Anders' muted staring. It didn't help that the setting for Carver's interrogation was a crowded bar.

In other words, Carver was being asked about his participation in the Fifth Blight in front of his brother, a fugitive Tevinter slave...

A pirate the Postal Service had investigated because of Carver's curiosity,

The former First of Theron's clan,

A former Grey Warden recruit Carver had once sicced Zevran and Leliana on,

A merchant *storyteller*,

The City Guard *Captain* of Kirkwall,

An *actual prince*,

And the thirty patrons of the Hanged Man, who were *definitely* not listening. Only Justice seemed indifferent to the situation, peacefully napping in Anders' lap where the mage distractedly stroked his roommate.

Carver stared hard at his drink, and didn't sigh. “After Ostagar, the king's army was understandably short-staffed. I filled in as a runner

between the southern front line and areas of military interest.”

Garrett didn’t budge. “You couldn’t have a message sent to Kirkwall?”

“Not without compromising the essence of my mission.”

Garrett’s eyes flicked to Carver’s drink. For a terrifying second, Carver thought Garrett knew.

Garrett knew that the next question would test Carver’s willingness to speak.

The older Hawke opened his mouth. “How do you know Sandal?”

Carver’s head blue-screened, and he looked up with a thunderstruck expression, so blindsided by the question that he found himself speechless. Garrett somehow found ways to defy expectation even against Carver, with all that Carver knew.

“What...?”

“I’m asking the questions here, brother,” Garrett reminded. “Before you rescued Mother, I saw Sandal and someone in your armour while passing through the market one day. Sandal smiles at almost everyone, but you hugged him farewell. It wasn’t the first time you two had spoken...so. How. Do you know Sandal.”

Carver gaped.

Varric chuckled, lightening the mood. “Flies are gonna find your mouth, Shiny.”

Carver snapped his jaw shut. It wasn’t an empty warning in the Hanged Man. “Sandal...he’s a former travelling companion of sorts.”

Garrett cocked a brow. “While you were running messages?”

“Yes.”

“That’s it?”

Carver relaxed. “Yes.”

“You must know his father well, then.” Garrett, too, leaned back in his chair. “Bodahn told me that he and Sandal spent the majority of the blight together with the Hero of Ferelden, or running messages for her. I suppose from a certain point of view someone can consider the

Circle, the Brecilian Forest, Orzammar, and Denerim as areas of military interest. Especially if that someone is Teyrn Loghain, or a soldier he had sent with the Grey Wardens.”

How the—

What the—

*Darn it.*

“Garrett—”

“*Busy?*” Garrett’s voice rose incredulously. “Maker, Carver! How many times have you nearly died, and proven Mother’s grief right? You wanted to let *King Cailan* write to our family whether or not you were alive? Did you know what you were getting into when you agreed to *hunt down an archdemon*? Andraste’s flaming *tits!*”

Carver shifted in his seat. “Keep your voice down...”

“How do you expect Mother or Bethany will react—!”

“You can’t,” Carver’s gaze suddenly sharpened, finding Garrett’s. His tone was as flat as a bared knife, but fraternity concealed it in silk. “I’ll tell them myself, and in the fashion I see fit, but — Garrett. I can’t continue to...do my job if my name goes around. I never agreed to serve in the back line in Ostagar, or to—” limit his reach for running messages, “—follow the Wardens, but the king’s army doesn’t need my consent to give me an order.”

“Until it does,” Anders spoke up for the first time, tone subdued. Yet where the Hawke brothers were sharp knives, Anders was blunt. “You turned on Teyrn Loghain and volunteered him to the Grey Wardens. What *job* in the king’s army has you command even your commanding officer, unless Teyrn Loghain wasn’t one to you?”

Carver frowned.

Aveline twitched where she sat listening. “No job at all,” she concluded. “Even Maric’s Shield, the elite of the king’s army, takes orders from Teyrn Loghain. Or, took. Carver must have been in a position that I would empathise with, if his superior had been corrupt like mine. Even then, I would have let the chain of command handle the issue, instead of turning over my boss’s boss to a third party.”

The official story behind Loghain’s enlistment into the Wardens was

still purposefully vague. Anders' deduction cut through more of it than certain parties would have liked.

Carver's voice was even. "To be fair, Guard-Captain, you were only part of the king's army when the king summoned your lord's forces. The manner with which 'royal legion' affairs are handled is for the royal legion to know."

"...A bit surly, your brother," Aveline muttered to Garrett.

"My job," Carver returned to Anders, "is also not for you to define."

Anders tilted his head. "Then look me in the eyes when I'm talking to you."

"Alright!" Varric clapped his hands. "Why not a couple more ales? Carver shouldn't be the only one drinking!"

Garrett's piercing gaze flitted between each speaker as he contemplated Carver's still hand and the mug next to it. As the orders arrived, Garrett glared over his shoulder, and the Hanged Man reluctantly regained its usual chatter, if regretful at getting caught and not being able to hear more. Garrett turned back forward in his seat and didn't speak despite his staring at Carver, and his friends quieted in expectation until their server left.

Garrett crossed his arms. "You run messages."

Carver searched his brother's face for a mental handhold in their conversation.

"Officially," Garrett clarified, then shook his head. "Right, you need to hear a question. Carver, are you in Ferelden intelligence?"

Schooled expressions stared across the table at each other. Up until that moment, Garrett hadn't been asking binary questions, but that was the trick in mental Wicked Grace. A wise gambler lured others into a pattern, then cashed in with a sharp hook.

Even now, Garrett was better than Carver at anything.

Carver lifted his drink and took a swig.

"Unbelievable!" Isabela delighted over the noise of Carver's immediate spluttering and the table's excitable reactions. "You should be a spy yourself, Hawke. You can start with searching me for *hidden depths*."

Sebastian slid his drink aside for Isabela to cheerfully claim. “I don’t suppose we’re allowed to know this?”

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Fenris muttered into his drink.

Anders reluctantly slipped Varric a handful of coins that Justice impulsively pawed.

Merrill was twisting in her seat to her friends. “Was that a yes? Or a no?”

Carver ignored the energy around him. It was neither. Due to Chantry influence, Ferelden had had a manner of an intelligence department only once in history, and that organisation — swayed by the *laissez-faire* culture typical of Ferelden, among other cultures — had downsized and seceded into the presently known Antivan Crows. How Carver had *actually* functioned up to and during the blight was more similar to that of military police, but no one except the Qunari would grasp the concept, so Carver kept his mouth shut.

Or rather, open, to ingest the cat’s piss that only psychopaths could call a “drink.” Phew. At least dwarven ale’s burn had *quality*.

Fact of the matter was, Ferelden hadn’t had its own intelligence before, and, despite Carver’s personal wishes, likely never would. Yet to answer Garrett’s question would be to admit that Ferelden didn’t have a Swiss army knife of a spy organisation like certain nations — or more precisely, *stable* nations — of Thedas did. Even though everyone assumed spies were standard to their homeland’s government, not everyone was correct or corrected.

Garrett froze. “Wait, then the songs—?”

Carver groaned, sinking further into his seat. “You aren’t the only one who’s friends with a storyteller. Mine just likes to sing.”

At least Leliana hadn’t captured *everything* or the *full scope* of what he had done during the blight, much less what had followed after. Carver might actually explode at the attention for, oh, establishing half of southern Thedas’ political leaders including Orzammar’s; guiding Circle and non-Circle mages; leading the war against the archdemon he had helped strategise; and so on. That wasn’t counting what Leliana couldn’t know by asking those who had travelled with Carver.

Such as his helping kill Flemeth.



Surprised reactions erupted from the table while Anders pounced. “Then you really cut down an undead army with one hand and cured a boy of demonic possession with the other!?”

“Me alone? No,” Carver curtly corrected. “You’ve met Varric. The songs are exaggerated.”

“Why, that’s just slander!” Varric faked a gasp.

Carver vainly smothered an upward twitch of his lips and glanced up to catch Garrett staring at him, speechless. The mood around the table was warm, like a hearth. Carver and Garrett didn’t look away from each other while everyone around them energetically conversed.

Carver hadn’t taken a day off in a while, but he could enjoy this night.

Tomorrow, he would refocus on addressing the Tome of Koslun, Castillon, Corypheus, Château Haine, Meredith Stannard, and the entirety of Orlais. Just to name a few.

## Chapter End Notes

**Garrett:** \*Has tales about him that are exaggerated.\*

**Carver:** \*Has songs about him that he claims are exaggerated. Also implies that the Hero and her party are responsible for the heroic parts.\*

**Garrett’s friends:** Yeah, they could be related.

**Nails, in the future:** He was involved in WHAT now!?

I thought it was wild that in DA2, it took Ferelden’s monarchy *six years* to identify who was left of the king’s army. In Act 3, Aveline receives a letter informing her that she’s formally resurrected from the dead and welcomed to return to the army. I like to believe that in this timeline, the monarchy is stable enough that Cailan can afford to send formal letters *one* year after the Blight, not six.

To recharge, I’m taking a break from this fic. It might be for a week, maybe two. I plan to write the full scope of the Hawke siblings, Anders’, and everyone else’s reactions to Carver in upcoming chapters. Someone else isn’t keen on revealing *all* that they’ve done while separated from the Hawkes, hehe.

Please look forward to the next chapter, and thank you for the wonderful reviews!

# Pagan

## Chapter Notes

For easier reading, I'm trying not to capitalise ranks when I'm not referring to a person. It's something I've been doing since a while back, but as we delve deeper into Thedas politics/nobility, I have to be stricter with myself. I *am* keeping certain titles permanently capitalised, like a Dalish clan's "First" since it can get confusing.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Out so soon?"

Carver turned around at the estate foyer to look up at the second-floor mezzanine, where Garrett leaned on a handrail with crossed arms.

"Just going for a walk," Carver replied.

Right. "At night?"

Garrett watched Carver rest a hand on his sheathed sword. Garrett had to commend Carver for slipping into chainmail and reaching the estate's front door before anyone could notice. Without plate armour, the young Hawke tended to prowl about as silent as a cat. It sometimes seemed as if the Hawke estate hosted three family members instead of four, especially with Gamlen's loud personality eclipsing everyone else.

At least Carver had left his bow behind for the night. Garrett felt inclined to believe that Carver wasn't leaving Kirkwall without a word. The younger brother owned so little that Garrett's possessiveness of his family feared that Carver could grab everything he owned and vanish within a visit to the loo.

Garrett's nerves eased with Carver's non-answer. "I'll return soon."

"Before the sun rises, preferably," Garrett quipped. "Since you must stretch your legs so suddenly, take Brute with you. He rarely has the opportunity to run about without displeasing a noble. Brute!"

At the whispered shout of his name, a reddish-brown mabari bounded into the foyer from the adjacent parlour, short-haired tail wagging.

Carver opened his mouth. "Garrett—"

“Take my brother out for a walk, Brute,” Garrett suggested. “He needs company.”

The mabari sat on Carver’s feet as if to stick to the evanescent Hawke like tar.

Carver sighed down at the dog. “Et tu, Brute?”

Garrett descended from the second floor for the foyer as Carver and Brute left through the front door. He smirked when Carver shot him a look before closing the door behind himself.

A heavy sigh leaked out of Garrett.

It was indeed the dead of night, with no Orana fussing over bent utensils or Bodahn poking the parlour’s fireplace into a bonfire worthy of Orzammar. A peaceful blanket of quiet had fallen over the estate pricked with the distant torchlight of the occasional guard patrol. Garrett ruffled his hair as he sauntered into the parlour and fixed a woodpile into the hearth. A muted snap of his fingers bloomed a fire to life.

Garrett bonelessly sank into a couch and watched the flames. Carver had grown a handspan taller than him. He wore turtlenecks to conceal a white scar on the side of his neck, thin and puffy like the kiss of a blade. He liked Andraste’s Grace. He preferred to listen to songs about myths and ancient history, where the people were either long dead or immortal, as songs did. He never spoke in depth about Ostagar or the Deep Roads.

He struggled with sleep.

Sounds couldn’t wake Carver when he managed to fall unconscious, but he never stayed that way for long. Case in point, his attempt to sneak out that night. Garrett belatedly realised that tonight could have just been the first time someone had caught Carver. Ever since Carver had been the boy who hid in Lothing’s Chantry, it seemed that only the Maker knew Carver’s inner thoughts. Besides the details Garrett had earlier observed, Carver himself hadn’t changed.

His way of speech and sociableness were the same. Maker, if Garrett had shared the same mindset when they had been young, he would have been repulsed by Peaches, too. And the interest in swords? Carver wielded his weapons only as a means to an end, like his stick waving as a kid. His head didn’t live in fantastical tales despite being the subject of many.

Garrett couldn't speak for Carver's self-confidence, but his actions seemed to carry a certainty in their purpose. Saemus evidently admired that, given the viscount's son periodically invited Carver over for tea. Marlowe supported any activity that delayed Saemus' intended relocation to Seheron as a declared Qun convert. Petrice's legally confounding crime had blown the Dumar family's private matters out to the public, and the sharks had been circling since then. The viscount's position was unstable. Whatever Carver spoke of with Saemus, it at least balanced Saemus' and his father's conflicting desires, and saw to Saemus' continued stay in Kirkwall.

Carpet-soft footfalls interrupted Garrett's thoughts and turned him in his cushion.

Fenris' relaxed posture refocused upon sight of Garrett's expression. "...You have a question."

Garrett hesitated. "The Ben-Hassrath you mentioned before, the viddathari ones...can they be in high positions in our societies?"

Fenris approached the couch from where he had snuck into the estate. "They can, so long as the rank is reasonably discreet."

Garrett watched Fenris stroll around the end of the couch. "Like knights?"

Fenris sank into a cushion next to Garrett and slid an arm across the backrest, grey-green eyes resting on Garrett's face. "The Ben-Hassrath aren't the army of their people, but the priesthood. Normal people already in certain positions in our world can be converted and turned into qunari spies, but the occurrence is rarer the more public the figure." Fenris' olive gaze softened. "What's on your mind?"

Garrett paused. "You've noticed Carver knows a lot about...*a lot*."

"Including the Qun," Fenris followed. "You suspect him?"

"He's holding things back from me," Garrett stated. "I always know when he's lying, and I think he knows that I know."

Fenris hummed. "Do you suspect his reasons why?"

Garrett hollowly chuckled. "I can tell when he's lying, but I can't read his *mind*. I've never been able to since we were children."

"You've just accepted it," Fenris deduced. "Is it the same now?"

Garrett ran a hand down his face and exhaled. "I don't sense maliciousness from him. And you're not answering my questions."

The corner of Fenris' mouth curled up. Garrett liked that about him, among many other things. "I'm just surprised. You seem unbothered by what you've learned of your brother."

"Oh?" Garrett rose a brow. "This is me unbothered, you say?"

They both chuckled, the whites of Fenris' teeth peeking out. "You accept what you can of the world and let what you don't like slide off your back. I've always admired that."

Garrett cleared his throat. "Well, the Qunari aren't evil, just – incomprehensible." He groaned the last word, sinking back into his couch.

"And Carver is certainly different," Fenris predicted. "Tethras thought Carver was his brother's spy."

"So I'm overthinking this," Garrett interpreted.

"You see the clearest of all of us," Fenris corrected. "Hearing the songs, comparing them to secondhand accounts...the more we unveil of your brother, the less I realise we know of him. If a fraction of what minstrels and the Feddics say is true, then Carver shouldn't behave as reserved as he is."

Like a cornered animal, already robbed of adrenaline. Stretching out his strength in mental rations. As if he had no back-up.

Kirkwall was a pen of sheep in the shadow of a full-bellied lion. Carver should have had no reason to cowardly crouch, awaiting an attack he wouldn't be able to walk away from.

Garrett would have understood the energy had they been children no taller than Malcolm's waist. The world had been intimidatingly bigger, back then, and any normal child would have desired the peace of knowing they could beat it. Yet Garrett and Bethany had long outgrown the perspective, while Carver was still fearful of a monster under the bed.

No, not fearful. Mentally prepared with a certainty Garrett had seen once in Ketojan, right before the qunari mage had wordlessly immolated himself.

To protect those around him according to the Qun.

“You know I’m driven by my gut feeling,” Garrett began, and Fenris nodded. “If Carver is holding back from me, knows I know it, and isn’t malicious about it, then I suspect he believes that his actions are protecting our family.”

Fenris peered into his eyes. “You’re willing to accept if he’s a Ben-Hassrath.”

“Of course I want him safe,” Garrett’s mind leapt ahead of the conversation. “He hides it with deflection or misdirection, drawing the attention of people like Varric away with a hint of gossip, but Carver is – *scarred*. Regardless of his intentions, I sometimes catch myself wanting to throw him into a cage and lock him up. Wait. *Maker*, not like——“

“I understand,” Fenris placated.

Garrett groaned. “I don’t deserve you.”

Fenris’ mind visibly stuttered the same time Garrett’s did. “I — You don’t — have me.” Fenris snatched Garrett’s wrist before he could retreat. “Not in a slavery sense, Hawke, but in a romantic sense.”

“Good to know,” Garrett smothered a question.

“I haven’t been fair to you,” Fenris stated. “I shouldn’t have left you that night with the impression that you could wait for me.”

“Fenris,” Garrett cut off and fully turned to him on the couch. “Don’t talk about it if you don’t want to. You aren’t in a place to have a relationship with someone, and you’re working through it. I understand. It’s my choice to stand by you, ready to be more than a friend. Whether or not you want more, I respect that you have the freedom to decide on someone else if so.”

The firelight danced in Fenris’ eyes. “I don’t like Anders.”

Garrett nodded. “I know.”

“I don’t like that he flirts with you,” Fenris emphasised.

Oh. “He flirts with everyone.”

“I want to move past my former life as a slave already,” Fenris bitterly confessed. “I want to shed these blighted *memories* of lyrium burning

into my skin, hurry up, and be normal.”

“No one is normal,” Garrett reminded. “You spent time being fundamentally treated as lesser than someone. *Normal* can wait for you at the end of working through that.”

“Working through my memories, you mean,” Fenris listed, “and the boiling rage in my gut at the thought of Danarius breathing.” Nothing but killing the slaver himself would solve that. Fenris sighed. “I wish my earliest memories were of you. If I have a baseline for how strength, magic, or love should be, it’s you.”

A reflexive response died in Garrett’s throat. He had maintained his emotional proximity with Fenris after That Night, so he had no right to complain if Fenris spoke words that tempted Garrett to push for a relationship one of them wasn’t ready for.

Instead, Garrett sighed. “You are as cruel as you are lovely, Fenris.”

The fugitive slave turned in his cushion, retrieving his arm from the couch’s back. “I would apologise, if Anso didn’t firmly advise me against apologising for everything.”

Garrett knew that Fenris received a form of coaching beyond the concentration on verses or training dummies that the Chantry and its institutions often suggested. At least, beyond what Fenris had first found in his search for wellness through Sebastian, who could be trusted with private matters. A combination of Varric’s and Fenris’ own connections alternatively supplied Fenris with a more dedicated option when the runaway slave had asked for it — after That Night, now that Garrett recalled.

Fenris’ merchant contact, Anso, had a cousin of the same name who had been banished to the surface for refusing to share valuable secrets told to him in confidence. Anso the Other had since crafted a quiet career out of it and begun research into a vocally applied practice of healing. The dwarf was reliable and discreet enough that Varric had later paid for some of Anso’s like-minded peers and students to attend to Bartrand in Rivain.

Fenris seemed to be benefiting from his and Anso’s confidentiality. The former more readily expressed himself nowadays without prompting. Garrett appreciated Fenris’ sense of safety around him without worrying of being burdensome. They had never tiptoed around each other’s differences, but recently they had been growing more self-conscious around each other — as much as their feelings



had been growing. Garrett still hadn't retracted his open invitation for Fenris to knock on his door any time of day, even when Fenris had begun applying the freedom at night.

"Don't apologise." Garrett swallowed. "I'm keeping myself open around you, and I know what that risks for me."

"We should both be smart about this," Fenris sighed. "We can be honest *and* smart. We can think a word, but we don't have to say it."

"You want me to not compliment you?" Garrett checked.

Fenris snorted hollowly. "You must know when a thought passes the point of mere flattery, Hawke. You've already heard it."

The baseline comment.

Indeed, it had struck Garrett with unexpected force.

"*This* is your manner of indirect apology?" Garrett lightened up the mood. "Very well, I'll contain my outward appreciation of you to a minimum. Filtered words only."

"As will I," Fenris softly responded.

They both perked up at the same time.

"Did you hear—?"

Neither of them bothered to determine who had asked the question first, and simply flipped the couch just as a storm of daggers sliced the cushions open. Garrett cursed under his breath while Fenris dove for Lethendralis mounted next to the fireplace. The sword rang as Fenris wielded his former weapon for the first time in years since they had last retired it to decoration.

"Of all times to leave my staff in my room!" Garrett bemoaned as he exchanged a headache for an invisible blast against his opponents.

"You can't grow any dumber," Fenris soothed, then added non sequitur, "I left my sword in the foyer."

"Got it," Garrett grunted and threw an ornamental plate like a disk at an enemy.

The porcelain shattered against their head while Garrett darted for the doorway and snatched Fenris' real sword. They tossed their weapons

across the room at each other in a stolen moment of combat before tearing into their opponents with confidence. When the dust settled, Garrett caught his breath with detached remorse that his unfocused magic had deformed Lethendralis beyond use.

“Dwarves?” Garrett muttered at the corpses strewn across his parlour.

“Carta,” Fenris confirmed, toeing a crest closer to the fireplace. “Did you hear what they were yelling while attacking you?”

Garrett snorted. “I was more focused on not burning my house down.”

“*The blood of Hawke,*” Fenris quoted, “then something about freedom. That was all I could catch.”

Garrett’s mind caught up. “Attacking *me*?”

“I was in the way,” Fenris confirmed.

There was no question about it. For reasons unknown, the Carta had attempted to assassinate Garrett while he was supposed to be alone and asleep in his own home.

“Maker, *Carver!*” Garrett panicked. “He left for a walk with Brute!”

“Everything’s alright,” Fenris murmured to a groggy Bodahn at the doorway.

“Lock the house up,” Garrett curtly decided as he breezed up then down the stairs for his staff. “Don’t answer the door for anyone else, Bodahn—”

*Dok.*

The three of them froze.

Another soft thump, before the front door swung open to let in a mussy Carver, a bloody-mawed Brute, and a brunette with roughspun clothes and yet flawless makeup. Carver barely glanced up at Garrett while shedding a torn surcoat with a weary sigh.

Garrett ruffled Brute’s ears when the mabari trotted up to him. “... Carver?”

“There shouldn’t be any more.” Carver strolled over, tugged a corpse off of a sofa chair, and collapsed into it. “For now. The Gallows are also a fortress enough that unless the Carta brings lyrium with them,

no one's reaching Bethany any time soon, and even then the Templars will not suffer trespassers. Did the chaos wake Mother or Uncle Gamlen up?"

"No....?" Garrett answered in lieu of making sense of Carver's words.

"Don't worry about the mess, Bodahn," Carver waved off the concerned merchant. "I'll clean it up. You can all go on back to bed. Ah, Charade is welcome to my room. Charade?"

The brunette from earlier paused in her shucking a bloody pair of boots near the front door. Tipped over on the ground, Garrett could see now that they barely had soles. The bow and quiver on the young woman's back betrayed more careful attention.

"I'll take a closet," Charade snorted. "Anywhere safe from becoming collateral damage."

"Our cousin through Uncle Gamlen." Carver gestured to the woman. "I tripped into her before the Carta suddenly attacked."

Bodahn scurried over to help Charade settle her things. "I'll open the guest room across Messere Amell's." He caught Charade's expression. "...And inform him of your existence, Messere Charade?"

"I'll tell him," Charade interjected, "in the morning before breakfast. If he eats that?"

Bodahn smiled encouragingly. "He and Lady Hawke attempt to break fast every day together."

Garrett whiplashed. "Our...cousin."

"Mama told me of my father before she passed away," Charade shared. "Spoke of an Amell whose search for precious rocks had cost him his marriage. I thought if I lured Gamlen in with the gem he was looking for the most, he'd come seeking me himself."

"She's a treasure hunter," Carver commented as if that explained anything. "Like anyone in that profession, she ended up backstabbed by her allies. They...contributed to the ruckus with the Carta. She was fortunate that I had happened across her in time. In a sense."

"Treasure?" Garrett parroted.

Charade revealed a diamond choker with a dazzling statement

diamond in the centre. Even in the dim firelight, it seemed the entire moon itself was sealed within the central jewel.

“The Gem of Keroshek,” Charade introduced.

*Oh*, Varric would *kill* to hold the mythical artefact. Like the legend of the apples from Arlathan said to cure all depression with one lick of the fruit, the Gem of Keroshek was *the* lucky item that inspired the very concept of luck. Considering Charade’s brush with death and her elevation into the Hawke estate within the span of an hour or so, the choker was the real thing.

Garrett scrubbed his face, dizzy. “Alright Carver, the Carta is after father’s blood...and you figured it out already?”

Bodahn fretted. “The Carta’s main trade is in lyrium.”

“These lunatics aren’t driven by money,” Carver dismissed. “They’re also based in the Vimmark Mountains, so we can expect a few days of quiet before the next ambush. We can discuss it more tomorrow when we have more energy.”

A Carta clan *not* interested in trade? The Vimmark Mountains were also repulsive for anyone interested in moving goods without trouble or with reaching their destination alive, given the steep mountain range was inhospitable and riddled with ruthless bandits. Only the Merchant’s Guild bothered paying the minimum insurance cost that validated sending wares through the mountains.

“If you insist,” Bodahn happily led a tired Charade away to her room.

Garrett looked between Fenris, his disordered parlour, and Brute panting happily at his feet. “So you enjoyed your walk?”

“It was cut short,” Carver muttered, “literally. Brute was a good boy and quickly sensed the danger. We neutralised our attackers without issue. What are you doing?”

Garrett dragged the corpses into one pile. “Cleaning up?”

“I have it, Garrett.”

“Do you?” Garrett retorted. “You’re sitting in a chair instead of addressing the mess despite what you told Bodahn earlier.”

Carver’s lips thinned. “There might be stragglers.”

“You’re keeping watch,” Fenris realised.

Of course. Carver hadn’t slipped out of his chainmail upon returning home, and an unsheathed gilded sword was leaning against his armrest, its grip in his palm. Carver didn’t intend to sleep. He had already resigned himself to the fact that he struggled with it.

“I’m writing to the Circle,” Garrett decided.

“What?” Fenris and Carver reacted in unison.

Garrett sat on his pile of corpses and crossed his arms. “I’ll send Mother and Uncle Gamlen with my letter; the Circle *can’t* reject my request for Bethany. If a criminal syndicate wants the children of Malcolm Hawke, then they’ll get *exactly that*.”

X

Three mages walked into an ambush....

No, that wasn’t quite fair for Carver’s company. Journeying into the Vimmark Mountains came with risks, even for a six-man party composed of the Hawke siblings, Fenris, Varric, Anders, and Justice. Well, a six-man party and their indestructible feline. The ambush went more like this....

Bethany nudged Carver with a leather journal. “You fell silent. You’re thinking loudly, again.”

Carver curbed a sigh, accepting his journal with gratitude and reluctance. “I’ve already told you everything I could about my experience in the king’s army.”

“And none of your personal opinions regarding it,” Bethany quipped. “How you feel has always been more relevant than what you’ve done.”

Carver had barely dodged witnessing Gamlen and Charade’s tooth-rotting reunion, but there was no escaping Bethany’s will. She had been delighted to learn of an addition to their extended family. “Let’s talk about you,” Carver returned.

“You already know everything about me,” Bethany smirked. “I’m *your* twin, remember? Though quiet, I notice my surroundings; especially when a soldier of Maric’s Shield spies on our family in the midst of a blight.”

“Um,” Carver stuttered.

“It was thoughtful,” Bethany shared, “for you to use your work connections and check up on us. Although next time, brother, do be less shy.”

Carver cleared his throat, chastised. “Does Garrett know?”

They both glanced at the front of the party where Garrett was leading them through the mountains, guided by Varric and guarded by Fenris. In the days following the failed Qunari invasion, Garrett had eventually learned to stop touching the open cut across his nose earned from fighting the Arishok, though now Garrett sometimes scratched his scar in thought. Trailing behind Bethany and Carver were Anders and Justice.

Bethany muttered, “Nor Mother, for that matter. I wasn’t even sure the Shielder had been spying on *us* out of all the Ferelden refugees until I heard the song.”

Carver groaned. “Which one?”

“The Knight.” Bethany’s face softened into the impression of a smile. “You always wanted to be one growing up, whether as a Templar or a soldier. When Garrett said you wanted us to leave Lothering for Kirkwall, and then the Clash at Ostagar happened, I suspected you had sent us away for our own safety.”

“It was selfish of me,” Carver admitted. “I could have *forced* all civilians to evacuate Lothering.”

“And laid the groundwork for a tyrannical military,” Bethany added. “Still, I’m curious how you built connections in Maric’s Shield.”

“They’re a social bunch,” Carver deflected. “How is Ella?”

Bethany didn’t hesitate to answer, familiar with Carver’s unusual knowledge of matters. “She’s a smart kid. I don’t usually play favourites with my students, but Ella reminds me of myself. She thrives in study and animated fieldwork, when the Templars allow us to step outside.”

Carver pointed out Bethany’s current absence from the Gallows. “You have some pull.”

“I’m spearheading a scientific and arcane revolution,” Bethany

drawled, “so to speak. Apparently, I’m giving some Orlesians a run for their money. First Enchanter Orsino thinks it’s funny.”

“And Meredith?” Carver asked.

Bethany rolled her eyes. “Can’t be taken seriously for finding demons where there are none. You would think the Knight-Commander would understand basic magic theory.”

Carver nearly gaped. “You didn’t.”

A glittering smile answered him.

Of course. This *was* the woman who regularly deflected the Templars’ frequent questions about what Garrett actually did for a living and who his friends were for at least three years. Bethany even managed to evade suspicion with her convincing delivery. She possessed a sweet face that allowed her to pull off stories Varric would never be able to.

Including the story that Meredith was merely *imagining* a couple of mages acting shiftily because the knight-commander saw blood mages or abominations in every corner. Poor thing.

Carver admitted, “I’m surprised more people haven’t heard of your activities.”

Bethany hummed. “My researchers and I are dedicated to enlightenment, but are aware of our circumstances. We meet in secret to discuss our developing philosophies. Not all Templars in Kirkwall subscribe to Knight-Commander Stannard’s extreme measures, either; they just want the Circle to return to normal. Those Templars understand how things can and should be, as we do. However, I’ll admit that it’s a matter of time before my fraternity becomes known. Genuine joy in research and community is evidently attractive across borders, from Hasmal to Markham.”

“Your fraternity,” Carver repeated.

“I *am* an enchanter.” Bethany sniffed. “It’s common practice for enchanters to enter a fraternity upon promotion. I’ve simply founded one that I prefer not to advertise, though it is a lost opportunity to be unable to attend College of Magi gatherings.”

“Yet your fraternity still plans to eventually make itself known,” Carver deduced.

Bethany grinned. “We don’t even have a name yet.”

Carver sighed. “How about Illuminati?”

The known fraternities of the College of Magi were Aequitarians, Isolationists, Libertarians, Loyalists, and Lucrosians. Bethany had essentially founded a science club that had grown to encompass the Free Marches and evolve into its own clandestine sect.

Bethany shot him a beatific smile.

So, Carver was loosely related to a mage revolution, now. Just another weekday.

Anders caught up to them with Justice napping around his neck. The former was apparently done with silently glowering in Carver's direction.

“You’re insufferable, you know that?” Anders accused.

Carver blinked. “So I’ve been informed. Garrett’s still angry with me.”

“And confused,” Bethany added.

“You *helped* me escape the Grey Wardens,” Anders seethed. “You admire ancient Templars and told Hawke that you learned Templar abilities from a Warden. You hail from a family of blighted apostates. You’re a pagan!”

Carver looked at Bethany, who merely smothered a snort and didn’t offer insight.

Anders grew frustrated with Carver’s confusion. “You stand in the middle of two peoples as if holding hands and singing a song will make us touchy-feely. If you were a stereotypical Templar, this would be far much easier.”

“*What* would be easier, Anders?” Carver felt a headache developing. As usual, he didn’t know how to behave around mages.

“Th-This!” Anders gestured to Carver in general. “You and your illogical reticence, even at the cost of others’ good opinion. Your alarmingly blue eyes. And your——“

“Arms?” Bethany offered.

“Stupid turtleneck!” Anders finished, then cut himself off at Carver’s



bewildered face. “Ugh!”

Carver watched Anders storm off to stick with the front of the party. Carver self-consciously hugged his arms clothed mostly by his long sleeve shirt, given his chainmail’s sleeves ended above his elbows and his surcoat was sleeveless.

“Someone left an impression when you last met,” Bethany commented.

“I shooed him away on a horse,” Carver stated. “Hardly the ingredients for a positive impression. What do you mean, ‘arms?’”

“They’re form-fitting.” Bethany gestured to his sleeves. “I’m surprised he didn’t mention your haircut.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Carver defended.

Bethany patted his arm. “Don’t worry about Anders. He’s a wet cat half of the time, and you’ve certainly confused him. Mother wasn’t kidding about her eyes being ‘Amell blue.’ How long did anyone believe you were a Marcher?”

“Not long,” Carver corrected. “My accent is a giveaway. Along with the fact I would introduce myself as Ferelden. I’m not *trying* to pass as a Free Marcher, Bethany.”

When they had been young, the elderly of Lothering had thought that non-brown eyes were a myth. Should any Chantry or imported artwork depict otherwise, it was a decision of the artist. While Carver had grown to accept his backwater hometown was what it was, he still regretted its isolation. Not until Leandra or Carver’s direct interaction did the elders finally accept that blue eyes were possible – however, the “myth” of elves’ green or grey-green eyes remained steadfast. In a place as remote as Lothering, elves themselves were practically fiction.

Bethany chuffed. “You’re not curious about Mother’s family? About belonging somewhere? In the Circle, I feel a little more accepted just as I am.”

“You deserve it,” Carver deflected with honesty. “So, Anders is confused about my allegiances? Or is he just *confused*.”

Bethany snorted. “You should have seen him around our brother before Garrett and Fenris – oh.”

“I already know,” Carver offered at Bethany’s hasty pause. “Fenris has a red cloth tied around his wrist, and the Hawke crest attached to his sword belt. He’s not exactly going for subtle.”

“It’s complicated,” Bethany shushed. “They’re working things out.”

“The tension is killing me,” Carver groaned. “I have to stay in the house. Ouch, don’t hit me, I’m fragile.”

Bethany snickered as they descended into familiar teasing.

“Stop roughhousing,” Garrett tossed back at his siblings, before a mass of Carta dwarves descended upon the party.

“Ambush!” Varric shouted.

Garrett and Bethany telekinetically slammed the Carta gangsters into the ground, allowing the rest of the party to make short work of them. The party stepped closer to each other as they traced a chasm into an abrupt drop, as if a titanic hand had scooped a bottomless hole out of the mountains, or a massive sinkhole had swallowed an entire peak. Either way, what greeted the party was a sight similar to Orzammar, where the earth suddenly sank into an abyss from which a terrifyingly majestic construction arose. Where Orzammar had a coliseum, however, the Vimmark Mountains had a prison dedicated to one, singular evil.

“These Carta cried out to a master,” Varric remarked, shaken. “They dedicated their needless deaths to some god. They’re as insane as Bartrand!”

Fenris frowned at the stone fortress. “What do you think is in there?”

“Kittens,” Anders vainly hoped.

“The one who wants our blood.” Garrett frowned. “The name these cultists called.”

“Corypheus,” Carver whispered.

## Chapter End Notes

In less privileged areas of a certain country, my grandparent’s generation grew up with black-and-white TV where they could access it. They honestly thought that certain characters’ light eyes were a product of the film, and not that the actors were blue-eyed

despite the movie posters. To my grandparent's generation, they had only ever seen brown eyes in real life. Which makes sense, since brown eyes can look black or golden brown depending on lighting. Just a fun fact about human perception!

**Light spoiler:** Anders has been mildly attracted to a lot of people, including Solona and Carver, hence his remarks in Chapter "Pest." Since Carver isn't a straight-forward character, however, Anders has trouble stereotyping him and thus reasoning his interest away. It's tough noticing people who know each other and/or are together, especially when you can't convince yourself to stop being attracted to what you're attracted to.

Anders also strikes me as someone who *wants* a close relationship, is *aware* he needs to work through a lot of stuff first, yet prefers to ignore his problems by addressing others'. In DA2, he's a healer and an agent of the Mage Underground who won't accept money – literally, a charity worker. However, he reacts badly to criticism when he loses control of Justice. Only his respect for Hawke opens himself up to finally accepting he has a problem by the end of DA2 if Hawke has a rivalry with Anders.

To be clear, Anders isn't at the point where he has a crush on Carver. I'm more interested in writing about organic romantic relationships for Dragon Age characters than for Someone Else. Of course, that's subject to change based on how you readers feel as the story progresses.

# Family

## Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for the warm comments and support! I was inspired to finish the next chapter so quickly :O

It's a bit of a transition chapter. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Derelict mining shafts and shanty houses poured into the pitch-black pit from which the prison stood. The occasional worn-down statue could be seen upholding a tin roof or metal beam. As the party fought their way ever closer to the centre, they slowly came to the alarming realisation that the Carta cultists targeting the Hawkes had built the mining shafts and shanties.

And had accordingly allowed their decline, despite still lurking in them. The smell grew terrible as walled stone began to replace open mountain air.

Carver shook his head as the party stepped over Gerav's fresh corpse. Past Carver's shoulder, Varric leaned down and retrieved a bolt from his friend's throat.

"Gerav has always been crazy, but within reason," Varric remarked. "He was a genius."

Justice hissed. "Some manner of blood magic drove your contact mad, starting with his ostensibly consuming the taint."

"We're walking in blind, Hawke," Varric admitted. "Whoever wants you and your siblings dead, we'll have to investigate personally."

Garrett scowled. "I'm beginning to *want* to introduce myself face to face."

The few torches lining the Carta's hideout flickered with cave wind. Bethany flinched towards Carver. He reached for her hand without looking, meeting her own movement in the middle.

A bronto suddenly charged down a path for the party, yet Varric swiftly shot it once in the shoulder, then once above its ear as it stumbled. Garrett leapt off of the animal's corpse and swung his staff

down on the bronto's trainer past it, rippling out tremors with the force of his telekinetic blast. The trainer spat at him, comparing the dwarf's enlightening master to the inconsequential mortal that was Garrett, right before Fenris swung in lopping his head off. The rest of the Carta cultists rushing in at them were a matter of aiming to actually miss, rather than worrying about landing a hit. The rabid believers were quite the number.

Garrett eventually crouched before the bronto trainer's body, drawn to a soft light that cast patterns across his face like sunlight off of moving water. The energy oddly calmed the mind at the mere sight of it.

"Brother," Carver hesitated.

Garrett was already grasping the long-bladed spear attached to the trainer. A sudden seizure consumed Garrett as he convulsed back up to his feet, both of his hands white-knuckled and seemingly welded to the spear that had a long grip like Garrett's staff. However, the similarities ended there. The dirt-crusting blade subtly sported dizzyingly countless runes etched upon smaller runes, such that they seemed to merely be a hammered metal finish. Unlike any work Carver had seen in Orzammar or around Caridin, the spear lacked visual harmony, instead prioritising the crowded presence of all components a staff might need, including a massive ruby orb at the blade's hilt to serve as a focus stone. Still, the weapon's geometric detail deserved the identity of a dwarven work.

Garrett sharply gasped as the foreign energy flooded out of him and the watery light winked away. Everyone snapped a hand out to steady Garrett as he nearly dropped the ruby staff from his hands.

Bethany glanced at Carver, who had merely watched the brief yet alarming scene.

"Hawke?" Anders encompassed his concern and confusion in one syllable.

Garrett sighed heavily, regaining his consciousness to plant the staff on the ground and lean on it. Blue light faintly shimmered around the staff and his hands. "This was Father's."

"It reacted to his blood in you," Bethany determined. "Why would this dwarf have a staff that belonged to Father?"

"His staff while he was here," Carver amended, eyeing the focus stone that was the unblemished ruby. Orzammar's paragons had wasted no

effort or expense. “The key to our present grievances.”

“What are you saying?” Garrett sharply turned to Carver. “Father once rubbed elbows with gangsters and blood mages that had god complexes?”

Varric shrugged. “The Carta could have also stolen the staff, or picked it up from where Malcolm Hawke had dropped it.”

“After fleeing this place,” Carver allowed.

Garrett frowned. “You’re accusing Father——“

“Of leaving the Circle,” Carver finished, stepping past Garrett for the next hallway or mining shaft. “The Carta cultists thirst for ‘the blood of Hawke,’ and Father was a mage. It’s arithmetic.”

Between leaving the Circle and settling in Ferelden with Leandra, Malcolm had performed blood magic related to the Carta cultists’ decline in sanity, then vanished from the fortress’s vicinity without a thought for his staff. Whatever matter Malcolm had involved himself in, it had been the cost of safely disappearing from Kirkwall forever.

Carver wondered if Leandra was aware that Grey Wardens had helped “persuade” Lord Aristide Amell to let Leandra elope with her mage lover.

Fenris followed Garrett towards the path ahead of Carver. “The cultists want Malcolm Hawke’s blood to free this Corypheus. I’m compelled to point out that the name means ‘the Conductor’ in Ancient Tevene.”

The party moved to follow as Garrett stepped forward to lead, Carver at one elbow and Fenris at the other. The latter of whom side-eyed Carver.

If Carver had input worth sharing, he would do so on his own time. As it was, anything he had to say would merely put his sanity in question. After all, Carver doubted he would be able to speak as far as, “Father performed blood magic worthy of witches of the wilds to maintain shackles over a magister from the First Blight,” before receiving disbelieving stares.

As for their next step to summon Corypheus from his shackles then kill his current mortal form, well...Carver was willing to raise that up for debate. If Corypheus could transfer his soul to any tainted creature in

his vicinity, then he had the entire colony of darkspawn festering at the fortress's base to outsource to, along with the wardens lurking nearby. After centuries of Corypheus' power pressing against his binds, the prison's decay was only a matter of time, and the wardens and Carta cultists were evidently determined to speed the process up.

In hindsight, Carver felt fortunate that criminals had ambushed him during his search for Charade at night. Charade's traitorous allies had at first jumped Carver, followed by gangsters under Athenril, then Coterie thugs, *then* the Carta, until by the time Stroud and his wardens Carver had been seeking had arrived, it had been to a bewildering sight.

After disposing of Carver's and Charade's annoyances and evidently erasing Athenril and her smugglers from Kirkwall for good, Carver had petitioned Stroud to investigate Warden-Commander Janeka for corruption. Though Stroud insisted he had to complete his own quest first, the senior warden admitted that it was difficult to believe that Janeka had sent a kill order to the Carta for professional reasons. Carver had failed to inform Garrett of said order he and Stroud had found in one of the assassins' pockets.

Then again, Carver failed to share many things.

At the very least, Carver wanted to leave the decision of trusting Janeka or Larius to an unbiased, capable party he trusted: Garrett.

The abandoned shafts began to slant downwards with only rusty steel rails and the occasional toppled mining cart aside the tracks to suggest that more man-made works awaited at the end. This slim hope delicately carried the party's mood as the shafts' torches began spacing out, until gaps of pitch-black darkness divided them. The dark bouts stretched just long enough to stir a fear that there would be no lit torch awaiting them the next time. Carver kicked a pebble down the chasm as he descended with the party. The rock tumbled beyond its own echoes.

A yellow beam of light eventually broke the mounting dread in the fashion of a barred doorway. Adjacent to the abandoned mining shaft was a crowd of torches flooding a stone chamber with light and disappearing around a corner where their flames flickered with natural wind. An exit.

Garrett didn't even debate the door's lock, and wrapped his hands around its iron bars. With a flare of red in his eyes and a steaming hiss

from his gauntlets, the bars glowed and warped apart into an opening. Garrett sighed heavily as he cooled the iron with a gesture that erased the metal's red-hot glow. He had learned to sheathe his gauntlets when actualising fire so that he needn't fear repeating the act.

The party carefully stepped through the improvised exit before the hair-raising feeling of a one-way magic barrier washed over them. Conceding to their situation, the party warily ventured through abandoned stone rooms draped with moth-eaten banners that had once been a deep blue. Carver picked up a cloth corner to unwrinkle silver embroidery. Beside him, Bethany peered up at a tarnished shield which, like others they had passed, hung with a twin on either side of a doorway.

Bethany steadily pointed the tip of her staff at the shield, and the tarnish dissolved to reveal an etched griffon.

"This is a Grey Warden outpost," the enchanter gasped.

"In the middle of nowhere?" Anders doubted. "This place looks more like a prison, else why would the entryways be barred?"

Garrett frowned at each supporting evidence they passed. "What manner of prisoners do Grey Wardens keep, Anders?"

A scoff answered him. "Why waste the resources when you can pour archdemon blood down their throat? At least then you'll grow your numbers."

"Alright, then." Garrett turned. "Carver?"

Carver sighed. "Just because I spent time with the Hero of Ferelden—"

Anders interjected. "If *that* isn't the greatest understatement of the year!"

"Besides," Carver pressed on, "the main construct looked dwarven from outside, not to speak of the statues."

Garrett raised a brow. "I thought the architecture looked familiar." The Viscount's Keep and the Chantry of Kirkwall had been built by dwarves to house magisters at the time of Imperium rule. "Statues...as in the carved boulders the shanties were built on?"

"They've worn down over time in the mountains," Carver allowed. "The ones who carved them were also long separated from the usual



resources in Orzammar, so I can't speak to the statues' quality. It still doesn't disguise the fact that the statues depict Paragons Orrick and Ilona."

Varric spluttered. "Orrick, as in the original name for House Tethras?"

"If this place is as old as the First Blight," Carver confirmed, "then the king at the time of these statues' creation was Orrick Geran. He along with Paragon Ilona must have issued the prison's construction."

Varric's brows furrowed. "They would send dwarves to 'lose touch with the Stone' just to build something for Grey Wardens to run?"

"There are demons sealed away here," Justice commented.

Carver watched everyone slowly look at the cat.

Fenris muttered. "You didn't think to mention that sooner?"

Justice rubbed his ear under Anders' and yawned. "The demons cannot have performed the blood magic that ails these dwarves so. Sealed away, the demons are ultimately irrelevant."

"Father *would* do something like that," Garrett accepted.

"Sealed away by *runes*," Justice amended.

Fenris managed to frown at the entire mountain range. "Orzammar dwarves built a prison for *demons*?"

"Probably a byproduct of their original intentions," Carver murmured. "The runes would have given Father an easier time to seal away any new demons he had encountered while here."

"As if this isn't bad enough already," Bethany nudged him, "and your *probably* means *certainly*. Justice, where do you sense the worst of the demons? That might lead the way to where this Corypheus is lurking. Blood mages with god complexes tend to enjoy demonic company."

"There is only the one demon worth mentioning," Justice shared. "Its presence weighs down on its surroundings, stealing all colour where spirits might find any."

Carver cut in. "If most of the demons here are ancient, we have no reason to assume the blood mage is related—"

"Where is this demon sealed?" Bethany leaned in.

Justice's whiskers twitched the direction they had come. "The Pestilent One is outside."

"Malvernis," Fenris slowly recognised, "of the *Forbidden Ones*? One of the *first demons* that humanity encountered?"

Garrett whipped his gaze to Carver.

"No," Carver rejected.

"We have to kill it," Garrett insisted.

"Need I remind you," Carver stressed, "of the blood mage and his Carta minions who want to kill *us*?"

"Why are you so against this, Ser I-wanted-to-be-a-Templar-growing-up?" Garrett remarked. "Malvernis just sounds like a powerful hunger demon. I've faced those before as rock wraiths."

"No you haven't," Fenris disagreed. "There are types of demons out there that only madmen as privileged and brilliant as magisters have seen. Even then, the theory of the Forbidden Ones is maintained by string and hearsay from other demons. The Forbidden Ones were ostensibly the demons who introduced blood magic to the ancient Imperium. Their names are derived from an unspeakable, feverish feeling they supposedly draw out of witnesses' throats before the people kill themselves or run off to forever vanish."

Anders worriedly stroked his cat. "A feeling that besets Justice right now...?"

"I am a spirit, Anders," Justice purred. "I can't be shaped by another entity of the Fade no more than I can shape others. I merely recognise this demon as pestilence, greater than basic hunger. However, I agree that you pliable mortals shouldn't hurry to release and kill this demon. I should do it myself."

"Right," Anders gratefully deadpanned.

Carver meanwhile quietly exhaled in relief.

Garrett frowned at him. "You faced a demon like Malvernis before."

Carver promptly choked on air.

"*Sweet Andraste*," Garrett swore, "I was just taking a leap. Seriously, Carver!?"

“I’m in the king’s army!” Carver defended. “When I’m called to protect Denerim’s back alleys, I answer!”

Varric snorted dryly. “An ancient demon was literally in your back alley?”

“...Gaxkang the Unbound,” Carver admitted. “He had evolved into a revenant by the time I had encountered him.”

Read: knocked on the front door of “Vilhm Madon’s” quaint hovel and asked about a “Gaxkang.” Carver had ended up wrecking an entire back alley killing the demon possessing a dead body at above-revenant levels. Nails still spontaneously berated Carver about the time the commander had found his captain bloody and face-down in Denerim’s sewers. Nails had received a second fright when Carver had flipped over and groaned, revealing he had been alive.

Mixed voices of disbelief, outrage, and Varric’s own rapid-fire chuckle filled the stone chambers around them. “Honestly, Shiny, who *are* you!?”

Carver groaned above the din. “That’s irrelevant.”

“Au contraire,” Varric remarked, “I once thought you were Bartrand’s spy!”

Carver spluttered. “*What?* Tethras, you weave stories too often.”

Bloody *Hard in Hightown* author. Varric hadn't known what to make of Carver's unusual reticence and combination of knowledge, so the storyteller had — what, made Carver the Moriarty to the Holmes in Varric's crime serial?

“It seemed logical at the time!” Varric justified.

Fenris shook his head. “The Forbidden Ones outrank high dragons in power.”

“That’s enough trivia for today,” Carver decided, advancing the party through the stone maze. “We should reserve our strength for Corypheus and the Carta instead of imprisoned demons.”

X

Naturally, Garrett didn’t listen.

“The demon was in the way!” Garrett defended as he ducked under a

flaming fist.

“You—” Carver deflected a massive kick with Summer Sword, “—were too eager!”

Bethany telekinetically slammed the fiery pride demon to the ground while it was off-balance. She huffed. “At least allow us to position ourselves *before* you unleash a massive demon, Brother.”

Garrett swung his staff over his shoulder without looking, killing the demon. “Cheek from my own family, I can’t believe it.”

His staff shattered.

Fenris snorted while he drew close to Garrett, checking the latter over for any injuries. “How fortunate you have a spare.”

“Right,” Garrett drawled as he unsheathed the ruby staff from his original staff’s sling. “As in, the rusty keepsake from my father with which he might have committed binding blood magic.”

Justice batted the demon’s remains as it scattered, returning to the Fade. “That key resonates with this seal. None other may undo this magic without consequence.”

Anders protectively picked up the cat and retreated, eyeing the magic circle the demon had been sealed in and now dissipated from. “That warden Larius said the only way out of here is down, then up.” He sighed. “Ever since crossing that magic barrier, we’ve been beset by darkspawn, and the seals to this barrier might contain demons. The ancient dwarves designed this place to separate the very air from the rest of the world, irrespective of who or what might stumble in. How could your father know how to reinforce such seals, Hawke?”

Garrett picked at dirt clinging to his staff’s runes for insight, shook his head, before giving up. “I can only reason two possible ways: through ancient dwarves, or through the Grey Wardens who maintained this place.”

Bethany stepped forward and waved a glowing hand over Garrett’s staff in cyclic passes. Centuries of rust and dirt began to fall away, bringing the staff’s runes in clearer view.

Bethany, Garrett, and Anders suddenly hunched together to stare. Carver, Fenris, and Varric shared looks.

“Lunar rune patterns,” Bethany gaped. “I’ve only ever seen them in textbooks.”

Anders traced etchings that spiralled into each other with his finger, as if reading. “They *resonate* with the magic circle here. Where the power of one waxes, the other wanes. This staff is *literally* a magic tool!”

“Untainted blood is required to attune to it,” Garrett remarked, and pointed at a seemingly random spot of the blade. “Here, a biomarker. No wonder my other staff shattered; with these many failsafes, only *this exact* staff wielded by one of Father’s blood would be recognised by the magic circle.”

Varric muttered while the mages nerded out. “It must fetch a handsome price.”

Fenris and Carver smothered a snort.

At that moment, Larius skittered in no less addled than when the party had first tripped over him while escaping the stone chambers. The gaunt, nearly ghoulish warden twitched his head about to take in the room without using his peripheries.

“Yes, yes,” Larius wheezed. “Two-thousand years, the magic held, never broken. Absorb it all.”

“Down, then up,” Garrett echoed. “In other words, we need to undo the seals maintaining the magic barrier over this place to escape. Wouldn’t that also mean releasing the blood mage who is stuck here and somehow corrupted the Carta?”

“Corypheus,” Larius winced, flinching from an unseen flame. “He cries out in the darkness, calling. He demands freedom – but I was there! When the last to hold the key, the Hawke – laid the seals. Before I became this. Corypheus’ freedom must be followed – with death!”

“On that, we can agree,” Garrett huffed. “Why didn’t Father kill this Corypheus in the beginning before reinforcing the prison...around him....”

Two-thousand years of unbroken magic. “Corypheus” was a word in Ancient Tevene.

Carver saw the hair stand on Varric’s neck. “*Maker*, Hawke, what’s with you and the *primaeval*?”

“The darkness,” Larius suddenly sprung off like a loose rabbit, “I hear – what’s there?”

The party darted after Larius down broken steps and past shattered columns. The stone chambers had opened up to a bridge connecting to the towering prison that rose from the black pit, and Larius had spurred the party to cross the bridge and descend the ancient prison. Carver knew magic seals awaited them from the tower’s main floor, down to the Deep Roads, then up to the top of the tower. Now, racing to keep up with Larius and bat away any obstructive darkspawn or freed demons, the journey felt uncomfortably close to the scurrying of rats in a vertical stone maze.

While the party tackled the prison’s abundant seals and strained to keep the nimble Larius in their sights, Bethany shook her head. “I don’t understand. Dwarves and wardens from the First Blight imprisoned a Tevinter blood mage here where untainted mages like Father maintained the seals for millennia, before Corypheus has learned to touch the minds of any who draw close to the magic barrier? Maker, those poor Carta....”

Varric snorted. “That’s not the usual first reaction, Sunshine.”

“The demons caught in some of these seals also speak,” Garrett muttered hotly, “mimicking Father’s voice, saying things I’ve never heard him utter before.”

“Imitating a memory,” Justice corrected. “Spirits are shaped by deep emotions, particularly confusion, hence their corruption into demons.”

Garrett struck down a pride demon as he drained another seal of its magic with his staff. “You’re saying while Father was reinforcing the seals, he *regretted* being a mage so much, his emotions imprinted on reality?”

“Hawke,” Fenris murmured in concern.

Garrett slammed a darkspawn aside, tracing Larius’ movement in the chaos. The further into the prison they blindly ran, the more creatures they encountered that were as trapped as them. Garrett easily broke some of their spines.

Garrett had grown up proud to share Malcolm’s gift with magic. On top of vainly running about under a powerful blood mage’s blood-curdling gaze, Garrett’s foundations were being shaken.

“Carver,” Garrett’s voice tensely left him, “what do you figure cost Father’s freedom from the Circle?”

The world shrank into a dense ball. Carver outstretched a hand and caught the mental apple, answered by an eruption of white fire. Garrett, Bethany, and Anders’ shields flickered over everyone behind Carver as demons and darkspawn fell before them. Even past the smite, it seemed the world delicately remained in the palm of Carver’s hand.

“We can only speculate,” Carver began, before catching sight of Garrett’s crumbling expression. Carver sighed. “The Grey Wardens may have scouted Father, a mage aiming to flee Kirkwall’s Circle, and persuaded him to help them reinforce the prison’s seals. In exchange, they could have provided assistance with Father’s escape.”

“But your name is *Carver*,” Garrett pressed. “Father wouldn’t honour a stranger with apparently little role in his freedom, unless Ser Maurevar Carver was actually a warden and not a Templar.”

Carver blinked. “You remember?”

Garrett grumbled as the party progressed down the deepest foundations of the tower. “I was jealous of you, for a time.”

Carver spluttered. “*You* were jealous of *me*?”

“I’m an adult now,” Garrett continued. “To hear Father’s true thoughts about his gifts upsets me, but I know they have no relation to his love for you. I just struggled comprehending the idea of siblings when we were young. Sharing attention.”

As the demons fell, Malcolm’s voice drifted through the air. “*I’ve bought our freedom, Leandra. We can go home now, us and the baby. I hope it takes after you, love.*”

Bethany’s lips thinned. “Father got that one wrong twice over.”

“He had never lived outside of the Circle with his abilities,” Carver quickly reasoned. “Before leaving for Ferelden, he wasn’t allowed much space to appreciate what he had.”

“*I would wish this magic on no one,*” Malcolm’s will faded away. “*May they never learn what I’ve done here.*”

Carver saw the party pause as a chill ran down their spines. Varric

leaned down to pick up a writing slate mixed with stone debris, darkspawn corpses, and the remains of dwarven armour.

Anders peered over his shoulder. “The Legion of the Dead from the Exalted Age. On King Orrick’s order, they were searching for the Paragon’s wrongfully exiled son, Tethras Geran, to return him home or to the Stone.”

“Not just the Exalted Age,” Varric murmured, tossing the writing slate with others on the ground, briefly making everyone jump at the clatter. “Orzammar’s kings kept issuing the order, and the Legion kept answering. Idiots. No one knew that like the prince, they were fated to die far from home the moment they crossed this prison’s barrier.”

Fenris exhaled. “Malcolm Hawke knew what he was upholding by agreeing to reinforce the seals. This place is a prison that doesn’t discriminate and lasts forever.”

The tower’s foundations seemed to twist into themselves before finally opening up to a passageway to the floor above that wasn’t obstructed by boulders. Aside was a skeleton in dwarven armour that still retained fine detail despite the ages, its arm stretched out towards the opening before succumbing to wounds or hunger. Varric’s steps faltered as realisation set in. He stared at the unflattering remains of his ancestor so beloved, that Paragon Orrick had renamed his house after his son and that the sovereigns and Legions in the centuries following had sought to at least lay the lost prince to rest.

Varric distractedly rubbed his fingers as if tasting the writing slate’s words he had held.

“Atrast tunsha,” Varric spoke lowly. “Totarnia amgetol tavash ae—”

Garrett touched Varric’s shoulder as the dwarf choked up. “Aeduc,” Garrett softly finished.

Carver could see it, how Garrett and his friends could survive weeks vainly searching a way to the surface from a primaeval thaig with no dwarven markers to help them. No promise of escape. Limited food and water. Waning strength to magick fire in one’s palm for light, dreaming of the sun.

With what little Garrett knew of other cultures, he was always there for his friends. It seemed in return, one couldn’t help but swear all of themselves to him. In one common dwarven word, Garrett managed to buoy the party’s spirits as they ventured onwards for more seals,



darkspawn, and demons while tentatively tracing Larius' trail.

Carver glanced at Bethany at his side, then gazed at Garrett's back. "Father had regrets," Carver carefully spoke. "Perhaps the deepest felt was the decisions he made here." And not the gifts that had drawn him into the unwinnable situation.

Carver's position in the party blocked Garrett or Bethany's expressions from his sight's range.

Garrett's voice left him even and determined. "It's time to lay Father's regrets and this Corypheus to rest."

## Chapter End Notes

In DA2, Orrick Garen is actually recognised as "Paragon Garen." However, Dragon Age canon also says that Paragons are recognised by their first name, i.e. Paragon Branka. As usual, I rolled with what sounded best.

# Cur

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Carver wearily watched Janeka and a small complement of wardens intercept the party.

“You’re that Champion...Hawke?” Janeka faltered, lowering her staff at apparent intruders. “Yes, the Carta spoke of you. No wonder you could travel this deep into the prison. Malcolm Hawke’s blood runs in your veins.”

Garrett quirked a brow. “You better not be Corypheus.”

Janeka scanned the party’s grip on their weapons, save for Carver resting his hand on his pommel. The warden-commander let Garrett’s threat roll off her back. “You refer to the most powerful darkspawn the Wardens have ever encountered. Thirty years ago, my predecessor had Malcolm Hawke perform blood magic rituals to reinforce the prison’s seals, however I believe the wardens of that time were mistaken. Corypheus isn’t a threat to humanity, but our greatest opportunity: a darkspawn who can speak, feel, and reason.”

Anders immediately snorted. “Please, talking darkspawn are as clever as humans. You’re fooling yourself into believing one would willingly assist wardens in any capacity.”

Janeka shook her head. “There is more to gain from undoing Corypheus’ prison than simply freeing oneself from this place. I have a spell that will allow me to harness Corypheus and use his magic to end all blights.”

“Blood magic,” Fenris perceived.

Justice was blessedly self-aware in the moment to play the dumb cat. Based on the tabby’s expression, the spirit was barely containing the urge to attack – or worse, *speak*.

“Like the rituals,” Janeka pointed out, “which were created in an age where the Chantry had yet outlawed blood magic. This is the way of the Grey Wardens. The world wouldn’t know peace otherwise.”

At that moment, Larius leapt out from the shadows, spit flying.

“Corypheus is using you! Using the Calling to make you believe – his thoughts are yours. The thought that he’s negotiable! Controllable!”

“You’re obviously tainted yourself,” Janeka dismissed. “From your ghoulish degradation, you’re close to the end of your Calling: when withering wardens descend the Deep Roads and take down as many darkspawn as possible with them. The company you keep is crazy, Hawke.”

“We like to keep to a theme,” Garrett drawled.

“The Wardens knew Corypheus was too powerful,” Larius insisted. “His waning prison — is the opportunity to kill him. Before he regains consciousness!”

“Hold it,” Garrett cut in. “How can a...darkspawn blood mage drive the Carta insane and seek my blood while *asleep*?”

“He dreams,” Larius crooned.

Janeka nodded.

“Right,” Garrett deadpanned. “You think you can control someone like that?”

“Never!” Larius raged. “She knows not of what she speaks! This one force-fed the taint to the dwarves outside – sent them after the blood of Hawke!”

“You *what*?” Bethany frowned.

Janeka’s temper cracked. “And *you* threatened the life of Malcolm Hawke’s pregnant lover to drag him into your antics! I recognise your armour and visage, *Warden-Commander*. I would have never gone to such lengths just for world peace!”

The wardens behind Janeka shifted. “Warden-Commander Larius...?”

“I know your faces,” Larius squinted, speaking softly. “Alec, Roland, you once followed me faithfully.”

The wardens guiltily averted their gaze from both Larius and Janeka.

“I dislike overthinking,” Garrett decided. “I had a plan and I’m sticking to it. Corypheus dies.”

Janeka gaped at Garrett’s logic. “At the cost of potentially ending all

blights?”

Carver sighed. “If Corypheus is indeed powerful and capable of manipulating any tainted creature, then the reason he hasn’t been killed all this time is probably because he can cheat death. Slay him, and he might transfer his soul to a nearby tainted creature like the darkspawn trapped in this prison, or these wardens who have come to use him.”

Janeka twitched at his confidence. “Because talking darkspawn are so simple to deduce for you?”

Anders shrugged. “We’ve disposed our fair share. Although, Carver, I never did hear how you resolved that *situation* back in Amaranthine.”

“Solona handled it,” Carver deflected, “and not all wardens are privvy to their order’s secrets, much less an outsider like myself.”

Garrett blinked. “Solona Amell, as in our mage cousin? Mother mentioned one of ours had joined the Wardens.”

“Then you must see reason.” Janeka gestured to Garrett’s staff. “Immortal or not, Thedas’ best chance for peace is the imprisonment or enslavement of this creature, and no prison can hold him any longer.”

“Watch yourself, Warden-Commander,” Carver warned. “I shared what I know of a talking darkspawn like Corypheus, but not a rejection. If my brother seeks Corypheus’ death, then death he shall receive. Garrett, let’s abduct a tainted Carta gangster.”

“And force Corypheus to transfer his soul into a magicless vessel,” Garrett caught on, “then set the harmless wack loose where he can’t hurt anyone. You’re sure this will work?”

“Complete confidence invites arrogance,” Carver denied, “but whatever you desire, I’ll do my best to realise.”

Garrett nodded to Janeka and Larius. “Alright Warden Junior, Warden Senior. Out of professional curiosity, I’ll watch your attempt to control this Corypheus, and upon its apparent failure, the darkspawn dies. Does this satisfy the Order of the Morally Grey?”

The wardens reluctantly assented.

“Glad we could talk over it.” Garrett sheathed his staff, allowing the

fallen brick wall he had been holding up behind the wardens to tip and collapse the opposite direction.

The wardens jumped as Garrett and the party passed them. Kirkwall's high-ranking Circle mages were the only force magic practitioners Carver knew of, and Garrett and Bethany were naturals at it. For a rare specialisation, Bethany had learned she was Fade-touched as a child when she had instinctively — and quite accidentally — thrown a bully across a field and knocked him out. The Hawkes still blamed the incident on a passing bear to this day.

Carver drew close to Garrett and lowered his voice. "I don't think I have to warn you to watch your back."

Garrett matched his volume. "You think highly of the Wardens, do you not?"

"In Ferelden," Carver corrected, "seeing as I fought alongside some of them before. Still, if a darkspawn like Corypheus can sabotage the minds of tainted dwarves, what's to say he can't nearby wardens?"

"Mind control," Garrett murmured. "The hallmark of blood magic. This whole situation is insane. Anders mentioned he had encountered talking darkspawn before coming to Kirkwall, but it seemed like a tale. Actually, you featured prominently in his accounts — including beyond his time in Amaranthine."

"Wardens Elissa and Solona led those of us involved," Carver replied. "A teenage soldier with Summer Sword would merely stand out in one's memory."

Anders had actually never seen Carver wield the blade, but that was the excuse Carver was running with.

"A sword once lost in the blight." Garrett glanced at Carver's sheathed weapon, then at Janeka and Larius trailing behind the main group. Carver was concealing Summer Sword's identity from them, and thus the rumoured skill of its wielders. "You received it from Solona Amell?"

Carver spoke carefully. "Ser Cauthrien of the king's army had gifted the sword to Solona and saved Solona's life at the cost of her own. As a mage, Solona saw fit to hand the weapon to someone more worthy of the blade. I happened to encounter her soon after Ser Cauthrien's sacrifice, and with the logistical nightmare caused by the blight, no one has since formally relieved me of this."

“And the talking darkspawn?” Garrett continued. “Without Anders’ stories, I wouldn’t have known they could exist, much less that some had stirred up trouble while the Hero was partying in Denerim. How did a soldier like you end up involved?”

“I was guarding Arl Nathaniel Howe,” Carver replied, “and that’s all I can say. Despite Anders’ chattiness, no one but the inner circle of Ferelden’s Order can know about what happened in Amaranthine.”

Anders grumbled behind them, catching the tail end of their conversation. “If you didn’t want me revealing what I knew about you and talking darkspawn, you should have prevented me from tagging along to the Vimmark Mountains. I bet you somehow deduced what we would face here.”

“Maybe.” Carver coughed. “You were my idea.”

Anders gaped.

Garrett blinked. “I thought you two were friends when Carver told me he wanted you to come.”

“I would hardly call us that,” Carver teased. “Anders just owes me one-half of a mission facing talking darkspawn.”

Anders squawked.

The rest of the group noticed.

Fenris raised a brow. “What exactly awaits us at the end of all these seals?”

Janeke scoffed in response and Larius raved nonsense. The front of the party quickly averted a Carta ambush, complete with Carver disarming a Carta gangster while Bethany knocked the dwarf out with a telekinetic slam to the ground. Garrett hauled their bounty over his shoulder and moved on.

Carver sheathed his blade. “Given Corypheus’ intelligence and power, and the age of the ruins around us, he must have been one of the Magisters Sidereal: the mages who trespassed the Golden City and brought a blight upon the world.”

The wardens with them spluttered.

“Nonsense!” Larius declared, and for once the others seemed inclined

to agree.

Carver didn't deign to respond.

Varric muttered. "If I need to know how to kill *anything*, I should just consult you."

"I'm sorry," Garrett interjected. "We're supposed to kill one of the first sinners in human history!?"

"While he's waking up," Carver added. "Fully awake, we'd need more than just the lot of us. Your magic is powerful, Garrett, but it can't blow up a mountain. Of course, this is only if I'm correct."

"Silly me for not preparing ahead," Garrett quipped.

Garrett and Bethany didn't know that they had grown accustomed to performing magic near Carver as children. Without Carver by their side, the mages not only had access to their full power, but by this point also had a refined control over their mana that allowed Garrett to destroy the viscount's roof and Bethany to become an enchanter within three years of joining the Circle.

The tower finally opened up to the night sky where the moon and stars draped the Vimmark Mountains in greyscale light. Carver inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with crisp, earthy air.

"This is where you stop," Garrett turned to the wardens. "If I'm to kill Corypheus and stuff him into an insane person beyond the point of saving, it'll be the one who didn't threaten my pregnant mother or arrange a hit on me and my siblings. No offence."

Janeka crossed her arms while Larius and the rest were content to stay back. "Am I to shackle Corypheus from this distance?"

"Where's your earlier confidence?" Garrett marched on to the centre of the tower's topmost floor encircled by pillars and griffon statues. He tossed his voice back. "I believe in your ability to fail, Warden!"

Garrett dumped the Carta gangster next to a griffon statue on his way to the floor's magic circle, then drained its power with a cut of his palm and a motion of his staff. From the circle's centre materialised a tall, spindly darkspawn whose flesh and robes were fused together, contributing to his disproportionately large head and long limbs. Half of the darkspawn's face was sunken in like melted wax, thinning his basso into an eerie lisp.

“Dumat, speak!” Corypheus cried out to the mountain sky just as Janeka fired a spell at him.

With a twitch of Corypheus’ clawed fingers, the magic scattered, then drilled Janeka’s way before throwing her off the tower in the blink of an eye. Corypheus peered down at the party.

Garrett lit his staff up with electricity. “I’m not surprised, just disappointed.”

“Be you slaves or citizens of the Imperium,” Corypheus boomed, “your allegiance is owed to all magisters. Kneel! I demand answers!”

Bethany groaned while she watched Garrett unleash the full might of his lightning magic. “Just once, I wish you were wrong, Carver!”

**BOOM!**

The lightning parted past Corypheus like a curtain and spun out, pulling the air around each bolt before maturing into a controlled hurricane with the tower in its eye. The griffon statues around everyone lit up, attuned to the magic circle – or indeed, any blood magic as Corypheus dug into his frayed memories and mana reserves to command ice.

Varric wildly fired bolts at the blizzard gathered around Corypheus. “No one is going to believe this story in a million years!”

Garrett telekinetically deflected a barrage of floor tiles tossed up by the storm. “First he goes after the Maker in His house, then me in mine. I should feel honoured!”

Fenris snorted as he gripped his sword. “If Hawke has the energy to joke around, we’re golden.”

Carver followed Fenris into the fray as they confronted Corypheus directly, Carver rolling aside of spells and Fenris trading glancing blows for a transient jab through Corypheus’ ribs. Fenris materialised his hand to combust Corypheus’ side with blood. In Carver’s periphery, he noticed Bethany and Anders defending their Carta hostage from collateral damage. Justice’s fur flared blue with an instinctive cloak of Fade energy, lending him invincibility.

“*Curs!*” Corypheus seethed and raised a hand.

Carver dove for Fenris before he knew what he was doing – just in



time for them to slam into a pillar together. Carver's hasty cleanse of magic around them had barely spared them from the lightning whose thunder had thrown them halfway across the room. Fenris dazedly moaned under Carver who distantly realised his mouth was burning and tasted like iron. He had bitten his tongue.

The griffon statues on either side of them suddenly uprooted from the ground and violently tumbled past them for Corypheus. Carver turned and blearily caught Garrett leaping up the trail of statues to axe his staff's blade down on the darkspawn with a roar. The air itself seemed to split with raw power as Garrett and Corypheus' lightning magic clashed.

Fenris lifted his head to peer at the scene, only for Carver to shove his head back down and drive his sword tip into the ground.

***BOOOOOOM!***

Shielding Carver and another from a blinding, thunderous explosion threatened to splinter his mind. Carver had to meet such power with an equally willful grasp of theoretical physics, and the instant Carver tried, he felt all his energy suck out of his naval. Summer Sword was the only reason he was still crouched over Fenris instead of flat on the ground with him. Yet if Carver didn't cleanse the space around them of magic, they risked being fried. Whereas smite was a one-off explosion, cleanse area was a continuous wave of world order. At least Bethany and Anders could protect themselves and the Carta gangster with shields.

The moment lasted only a second.

Carver thanked the Maker it did as he fainted.

X

Voices beyond Carver's awareness quieted as he slowly opened his eyes. Garrett and the party were sprawled across the parlour of the Hawke estate. Carver was still in his chainmail; most likely, he had just been dumped on the couch before regaining consciousness.

Carver carefully sat up, feeling the tell-tale exhaustion of having strained himself with Templar abilities. "I take it Corypheus is a helpless dwarf, now?"

Varric chuckled from where he was perusing Garrett's library. "Remember how Bethany wished you were wrong once? She takes it

back.”

Carver glanced around, noting her absence. Already back to the Gallows, sadly.

“Proximity meant little,” Fenris commented. “The Carta dwarf awoke unchanged in his insanity and scurried after Larius’ shadow, as did the other wardens. It seems Corypheus possessed the former warden-commander.”

“The Free Marches’ Order won’t readily fall under Corypheus’ thrall,” Carver determined he could safely share. “A senior warden by the name of Jean-Marc Stroud is investigating Warden-Commander Janeka’s recent activity as Commander of the Grey. Her untimely death will force him to enquire after details. Healthy suspicion of Larius and his complement of wardens will curb Corypheus’ ability to alter other wardens’ minds.”

Anders huffed. “Even unconscious, you somehow know more than we do.”

Carver deflected. “I’m supposed to be a Ferelden spy, remember?”

“I’ll share *one* fact you don’t know before Mother realises we’re home,” Garrett spoke. “We killed Malvernis.”

Justice purred in Anders’ lap. “I dealt the finishing blow.”

Anders cooed. “Yes you did.” Which probably meant Anders had held the cat up to the demon’s face and let Justice bat its nose.

“Malvernis turned into a skeletal dragon halfway through,” Garrett continued. “Was it the same for you?”

Carver rubbed his temples, surrendering to Garrett’s willfulness to fight one ancient evil after another. “No, Gaxkang remained humanoid to the end.”

Anders chirped. “Then who was the spectral dragon in the Blackmarsh?”

“The Queen of the Blackmarsh,” Carver curtly replied. “An actual dragon who merely left a weight in reality past her death. She was nowhere near as difficult as a Forbidden One.”

Varric spluttered. “You’ve killed a high dragon before?”

Carver smoothly replied, "It was a group effort."

"Now that we're all up to speed," Garrett sighed, revealing a gilded envelope, "I regret to inform that I've been invited to a party, and am allowed a few additions to accompany me."

Carver collapsed back into the couch. "You also killed *Antivan Crows* while dragging my body back here?"

"We had help," Fenris muttered.

"Don't take Tallis for face value," Carver reluctantly advised. "She's a Ben-Hassrath."

Brief choking answered his honesty.

Garrett recovered and slowly turned to Carver. "I just want to say... I'm fine with you being a Qunari spy. If you were one."

Carver whipped his gaze to the side. "You think I'm a Qunari spy!? You spend too much time with Tethras."

Varric held his heart in mock pain.

Garrett raised placating hands. "Spies don't have to be only Ferelden. I don't wish to discriminate. Also, it's creepy how you know details typically beyond one's ability."

"Which makes me a viddathari?" Carver deadpanned. "I *have friends* who tell me things, Garrett."

"Could have fooled me," Garrett muttered. "Anyway, spy or not, Tallis just wants help from Kirkwall's Champion with stealing a jewel from Duke de Montfort's vault. Between someone of straight-forward goals like her, and random assassins who'd rather steal a letter than scale Duke de Montfort's walls, I'd prefer to share my invitation with the former. Are you coming or not?"

"Of course I am." Carver eyed Garrett's invitation. "Rendon Howe is hiding in Château Haine, after all."

Varric chuckled and waved his hands in front of him. "If I attend, you're taking the lead, Hawke. I'm allergic to snobs."

Anders distractedly petted Justice. "You can count me out of this one. Maybe invite Vael – he's an actual prince."

Fenris supportingly nodded to Garrett. “Where you go, I follow.”

“Mother,” Garrett cheerfully greeted the parlour’s new arrivals. “Uncle Gamlen, cousin. You won’t *believe* what Father had sacrificed to buy his family a new life.”

While Garrett drew Leandra, Gamlen, and Charade in to update them on recent events, Carver shifted over to Anders’ side and lowered his voice. “Has Bethany ever spoken to you about her...research club?”

Anders quirked a brow at him. “I’m an agent of the Mage Underground.”

“And?”

“Here I thought you knew her fraternity’s principles,” Anders snorted.

Carver cleared his throat. “I understand Bethany’s people enjoy research and community.”

“We also oppose religious influence over public life,” the mage shared, “and the abuse of state power.”

Oppose *what* now?

Anders was still going. “I guess it’s just a product of Bethany having been in Kirkwall long enough, and of the fraternity’s amicable approach to apostates. Bethany laid down the principle that respecting each other’s beliefs helps smooth over the exchange of information, considering we count Dalish among our number.”

Bethany had founded a science club so *nerdy*, they considered state governments and the Chantry merely *obstructive* to their pursuit of knowledge. If they could gain information from mages outside the Circle, why wouldn’t they? Did it matter if mages learned from other mages, whether apostate or even Dalish?

Carver subtly coughed. “The College of Enchanters is composed of fraternities. Of *enchanters*.”

Anders hummed. “Technically, fraternities only send enchanters to represent them in College meetings, and since we don’t attend College meetings *anyway*....”

“Bethany bribed you to join, didn’t she,” Carver realised with silent horror. “Should the fraternity ever come to light, the Chantry won’t be

able to oppose your freedom from the Circle or your lack of a phylactery without risking friction with the Illuminati's Dalish members." Anders blinked at Carver's name for the fraternity, but Carver was already whiplashing. "Wait. Did you tell Bethany what I said about Templars?"

"Now that I know you're siblings," Anders admitted, "I'm surprised you hadn't told her before me — or simply groomed her to create her own fraternity."

"I try to allow my siblings their independence," Carver reluctantly replied.

Anders quietly spluttered. "What makes you think that's a good idea? They're Hawkes!"

Carver stared at him, then spoke slowly. "...I know that."

Maker's breath, Carver wouldn't be surprised if Bethany had *Templars* in her fraternity as well.

Leandra's excited gasp interrupted his thoughts. "A hunting party with Duke de Montfort! We *must* fit you and your friends for finery, love. The de Launcet children shall find fault in only their words and not your threads or conduct."

Garrett pinked in embarrassment. "Give the de Launcets a rest, Mother. To contest ourselves against their shallow pretentiousness *physically pains me*."

Leandra levelled a stern gaze on him. "The de Launcets are nearly as old as the Amell line, and have been exploiting our absence from social circles ever since your grandparents passed away. No Kirkwall noble should debase themselves so! Gamlen, tell him."

The reedy man stammered while Charade muffled a snort at her father's expression. "Leandra, I never enjoyed these occasions myself. Let the boy dress as he pleases."

"Only the hunt truly interests me," Garrett smoothly lied with puppy dog eyes. "Mayhaps you should attend the feast, Mother, if social etiquette affects you so? Uncle Gamlen, it's only right you escort Mother as the next oldest Amell, and you can—" Garrett's eyes sharpened on the treasure hunter. "You can bring Charade along."

"Bring *who*?" Charade's eyes widened, ambushed.

The suggestion seemed to calm Leandra. “I should also bring Bethany.”

Gamlen choked. “What manner of an Orlesian hunting party would justify the Circle sending her to us?”

Garrett interceded. “Bethany might not enjoy herself.”

Surrounded by cloying perfumes and fake laughter? Certainly not.

“I’ll extend an invitation to her anyway,” Leandra decided, then flitted out of the parlour. “Orana, dear, join us downstairs! We have measurements to take!”

Anders swiftly scooped Justice to his chest and hightailed out of the estate. Varric followed him with a wink. “You jokers have fun!”

Garrett, Carver, and Fenris shared bewildered looks. “*Varric Tethras!*”

X

The gates to Château Haine sparkled with white marble and real gold, sparing a glimpse of the château’s more dizzying main building. Even over the property walls, the main château seemed to capture the full noonday sun with its many windows like an endless sea. As if to celebrate the beautiful weather, blue and gold banners also gently flapped from the outer walls, and distant windchimes sang from farther in the château.

Carver would have been tempted to call the modest castle “flawless,” if not for the numerous wyvern carvings adorning every corner of the property. Even the château’s corbels flaunted grotesque, snarling wyvern heads. Carver squinted at the top of the outer walls to verify that they were casting a stronger shadow from the shiny main building than from the actual sun.

Varric muttered beside him. “Very Orlesian.”

“The Champion of Kirkwall!” Duke Prosper de Montfort greeted Garrett, quickly surveying his company. “Thank you again for selling me that exquisite dwarven relic from the Deep Roads. I’ll admit when I sent you an invitation to my hunting party, I didn’t expect that you would remember who I was, much less attend.”

Garrett gaily smiled. “I can’t turn down a good hunt.”

“I would hop to it,” Prosper earnestly advised. “My other guests have already taken to the grounds. Remember, he who hunts a wyvern first has the day’s honour!”

“Oh, I gave your guests a head start,” Garrett demurred.

Prosper laughed heartily. “I love the confidence! I can see you already brought your own complement of hunters!”

Garrett gestured. “My mother, uncle, and cousin as well. May I introduce Lady Leandra Hawke, Gamlen Amell, and Charade Amell.”

“My ladies.” Prosper accepted Leandra’s raised hand and kissed the back of it. He inclined his head to Gamlen and Charade, the latter whom dithered between extending her hand or wrinkling her nose at the opulent duke. “Château Haine is greater for the presence of Amells. Please, enjoy a promenade through my courtyard while the hunters and I make sport.”

Leandra cheerfully accepted and grabbed Carver’s arm before he could retreat. “May I also introduce my youngest son, Carver Hawke.”

Prosper hesitantly returned Carver’s nod. “Carver...Hawke, you say? The name Hawke and its variations frequent much of Thedas, though I must confess that only the Champion elevates the name to social circles.”

Carver met his gaze. “An even match for the name Carver, I’m sure.”

“...Indeed,” Prosper replied.

The duke’s eyes twitched to the sheathed Summer Sword by Carver’s side. Prosper knew.

He knew Carver was after Rendon Howe.

“As for the rest of my *hunters*,” Garrett cut in, “this is Varric Tethras, Sebastian Vael, and—” At Fenris and Tallis’ sharp looks, Garrett amended, “—friends.”

“The head of noble House Tethras,” Prosper recovered, turning, “the deshyr of Kirkwall to the Dwarven Merchant’s Guild. Along with the prince of Starkhaven! A delight.”

Garrett coughed. “Ah, Vael is a lay brother of the Chantry.”

“My faith will guide me when I return home,” Sebastian added.

“My sympathies for your family,” Prosper shared. “But enough of that! Wyverns await!”

Garrett’s party split off from Leandra and Gamlen at the château gates for the hunting grounds. As they trod deeper into the deciduous trails of the Vimmark Mountains, they passed by Orlesian nobles cluelessly erecting traps more suited for rabbits than wyverns. One group of hunters spotted wyvern excrement and rolled in the dung to “better attract the lizards.”

Tallis shushed Charade’s snort. The Ben-Hassrath was a lithe elf with burgundy hair that would have fallen past her shoulders, if not for the braided ponytail she maintained it in. Paired with her delicate features, modest hunting leathers, and kittenish smile, few would make the intellectual jump and realise that “Tallis” was not a name, but a rank in the Qunari priesthood just like “Sten” was a rank in the Qunari army.

“Tallis” meant “to solve,” a direct translation from Qunlat’s word for *assassin*.

Charade’s sharpened senses as an ostensible treasure hunter had caused friction between the two women in their first meeting. Charade could sniff out a liar a mile away, and Tallis was wilfully gripping tightly to her Robin Hood image. When Charade had grudgingly accepted Garrett’s request to join him in grand theft, Carver half-suspected that the brunette had only done so to watch Garrett’s back.

Charade had been in the precious rock business long enough to know one couldn’t trust anyone else but themselves – or one’s optimistic champion cousin. Carver made it a point to stay between Charade and Tallis for at least the illusion of party cohesion, though Charade often shot him looks. The young woman visibly wondered herself why Carver bothered following Garrett in his quest. Charade didn’t know that Carver had his own reasons for coming to Château Haine.

The brunette side-eyed the Orlesian nobles. “Do they even know what they’re doing?”

“Wyverns are an invasive species here,” Tallis informed. “Duke de Montfort has made a game out of curbing their population. Given the de Montforts’ closeness with Empress Celene, their favour is worth pursuing. Regardless, just ignore these nobles. We’re here to quickly hunt a wyvern and finally enter the château.”

The party agreed and judiciously tracked traces of wyverns through



the mountainous forest. They were eager to see the inside of Prosper's property walls.

"Vael," Garrett commented while searching, "I didn't know you reached a decision regarding Starkhaven."

"One I made only recently after much prayer," Sebastian confessed. "My distant cousin, while sincere, is...uncomplicated. I fear the throne will remain in contention while Goran reigns, and I don't wish to encourage sacrifice where none need be made. I will return to Starkhaven soon, and bear the weight of the crown if necessary."

"Aw, Choir Boy," Varric reacted. "After all these years, I hate to admit that you have me beat. What is it? You like boys? Sheep? You slept with your sister?"

"What?" Sebastian chuckled.

"Nobody's this bloody clean," Varric pointed out. "Don't tell me you're leaving Kirkwall before I can figure it out."

"I will miss you," Sebastian replied, turning to Garrett and Fenris. "I regret our time together was short, but it will forever stay in my heart. I should have told you sooner."

"Is this your choice?" Garrett pressed. "Not the Grand Cleric's or mine?"

"My own," Sebastian confirmed softly.

Garrett sighed, the corners of his lips faintly curling. "I'll miss you, too."

A chattering clamour from the depths of the earth interrupted the moment, climaxing with the eruption of tiddly little humanoids nearly as green as the forest. The party repulsively batted the creatures away, responding to the knobby pests' bloody violence with their own.

Charade scrunched her face at the aftermath. "What *were* those things?"

"Ghasts," Tallis helpfully informed. "Underground creatures so isolated from all life that they're near mythical. The hunt might have irritated them."

Sebastian shook his head. "From the heights of the heavens to the

depths of the sea, you made all creatures, O Maker.”

“No wonder He left,” Varric muttered.

## Chapter End Notes

A lot has happened, but allow me to say...ghasts drive me *bonkers*. I'm glad they only appear in one DLC.

As a side note, I learned that the proper way to camelcase French surnames like de Montfort is to spell it as “DeMontfort.” However, Dragon Age has used both no spaces (“DuPuis”) and with spaces (“Du Paraquette”) before. I've also already written most of the next chapter with references to the “Montfort family,” and past chapters have already referred to Gascard as “du Puis,” so I'm going to stick to the pattern. Woops.

# Little Bird

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wyvern bait involved dragonling blood, wyvern dung, nug remains, and Tallis' uncomfortably accurate imitation of wyvern *and* nug mating calls. Carver avoided eye contact with Tallis as the party set up to watch the treeline around them, wondering if a wyvern would truly respond to their amateur methods. The de Montforts' mountainous property was actually breathtakingly beautiful and calming. The occasional pond dotted the hunting grounds where sweet flags and pickerel weeds marked shallow and deep areas of water. Even the small clearing the party had nominated for baiting a wyvern was clothed with wildflowers. It was little wonder that Lord Norbert de la Haine in the Black Age had built a fortress in such a remote place. His numerous failed invasions into the Free Marches pointed to a man distracted by his backyard over advancing the Orlesian empire.

A barking klaxon suddenly descended from higher up the mountainside, bending trees away before pouncing for the party's hastily constructed bait. A deep purple wyvern flecked with venomous orange scattered the bait everywhere, including on the party, before noticing their presence.

Carver wiped his helmet's visor, grateful he had worn Charis' armour to the occasion, then nocked an arrow on his bow.

"First one to draw blood gets to bathe first!"

The party quickly made short work of the wyvern by dodging its venomous spit and temperamental tail while dealing blows. Garrett finally trapped the horse-sized lizard in a cage of heightened gravity, before whipping his staff's blade out and slicing the wyvern's neck open.

Tallis frowned at Carver's distance. "You have a sword; you could've helped up front!"

"I'm content remaining here," Carver transparently replied.

The trees nearby rustled, and the party pointed their weapons at the source. A bright, colourful party of Orlesian chevaliers strode into the clearing, led by the most loudly dressed of them. Where the strangers

wore gleaming helmets that imitated real faces, their leader went without such adornments and merely tweaked a perfectly symmetrical moustache in anger.

“The first wyvern kill was supposed to be mine!” the noble whined, flustered. “Mine, mine, mine! Today’s honour doesn’t belong with a champion of some backwater eastern country. Give me your kill!”

Fenris snorted. “I’m sure an arrangement can be made.”

“Mouth from a knife-ear!” the noble nearly fainted, crying out to his soldiers. “I can take no more of this. Kill them all!”

Carver groaned. Wrong thing to say.

The noble’s hunting party was flat on the ground — not with a few shattered bones — before they could blink. Red mist faintly flared from Garrett’s eyes — a sign that he was ready to fight with or without a staff, even if it meant blood magic. He had apparently done so before when facing the Arishok.

Fenris touched Garrett’s elbow. “Save some for the rest of us.”

Garrett grudgingly allowed the Orlesian hunting party to pick themselves up, only to be rewarded with shrill complaining.

“The audacity!” The noble drew his polearm.

In that moment, Prosper strolled in followed by his own larger, more organised entourage. Their robes were even tastefully coordinated to resemble the blue and yellow de Montfort crest. “What on earth is happening here?”

“This mutt tried to steal my rightful kill!” The noble jabbed a finger at Garrett.

Prosper remained unruffled. “Now, that’s no way to speak to the Champion of Kirkwall, baron.”

The baron whipped his finger to Prosper. “This is your fault for inviting a stinking turnip in the first place. Your mother would be ashamed!”

Prosper merely chuckled. “Says the one whose mother has slept with half of Val Chevin. My apologies, Hawke, Arlange has always been a cheat. What would you have me do with him?”

Garrett blinked at the offer to kill a baron for a slight. “I mean...his blood smells worse than the wyvern’s. Best keep it inside of him.”

Prosper merely *looked* at Arlange before the baron grudgingly left. A bright smile crossed Prosper’s face. “Allow my servants to transport your kill and lead you back to the château, Hawke. I will be a little while. Not all of us share your luck in hunting.”

X

Where the land outside the château’s gates possessed untamed beauty, Prosper’s courtyard stretched out as a blanket of pea gravel and manicured grass. Purple hydrangea bushes as tall as two men cloaked the château walls and created sound barriers between sections of the courtyard. At the centre of each section rose a ceramic fountain of a de Montford from history wrestling a wyvern whose jaws spouted out crystalline water.

The detail was almost graphic.

Fortunately, the charcuterie and sweets table sat at the end of the courtyard nearly nestled against the main château building, where the outdoor space had been favoured for a tiled rest area instead of another fountain. Minstrels filled the courtyard with music from the main building’s shade, and chevaliers in feathered helmets guarded the borders of the courtyard.

After changing into his finery, Carver left one of the few powder rooms open for guests and glanced around. Tallis had slipped into modest wear and was already cozying up to the elven servants walking around with hors d’oeuvres. Charade had taken up to flattering nearby guards. Fenris was quietly greeting Leandra and Gamlen in a maroon doublet and black continental tie that Garrett couldn’t tear his eyes away from, wearing a matching coal doublet and red ascot himself.

Carver inwardly sulked. Leandra had dressed the rest of the Hawkes – and Gamlen and Charade – in Kirkwall oranges and whites. Small diamonds ran down Gamlen and Charade’s finery like dripping stars, drawing attention to the Gem of Keroshek perfectly fitted around Charade’s neck. The young woman wore the item everywhere, considering it wasn’t safe out of her sight. Meanwhile, subdued rubies lined Leandra and Carver’s clothing. In Hightown, no one had house numbers; metal plaques with family heraldry instead hung over the lintels of estate doors. Garrett had pronounced the Hawke colours to

be red and black when he had hung an improvised heraldry over the Hawke estate.

In comparison, orange was less easy to blend in with – or look flattering in.

At least Leandra had chosen to display their identifying crests with subtlety. Embroidery of roosting birds in Gamlen and Charade's collars identified them as Amells, while hawks in flight lined the Hawkes' and Fenris' shoulders.

Mingling with other party attendees were Varric and Sebastian, the former whom defaulted to his usual merchant princely clothing sans the open shirt and leather overcoat. On the other hand, Sebastian was clad in a silk white tunic and black surcoat with a deep red toga wrapped around him, cinched at the waist by a brass girdle inlaid with pearls. Delicate embroidery as faint as spider silk patterned Sebastian's every layer with the long-haired creatures of the Vael heraldry. It was overall a distant departure from the Chantry lay brother who wore the same set of armour every day. According to Sebastian, the outfit had been one of his brothers', before Lady Flora Harimann had returned the clothing to Sebastian...among countless other treasures the Harimanns had stolen after their massacre of the Vael in Starkhaven. Only Goran's simple-mindedness had saved him from the tragedy that had struck Sebastian's home.

If Sebastian felt uncomfortable wearing his dead brother's garments, he didn't show it. Cordially speaking with the party guests, Sebastian looked every inch the prince of the Free Marches' most powerful and wealthiest city-state. Based on his dialogue with Garrett, it was likely by design. Sebastian was ready to step into a family role as the near-last of his bloodline.

Once the Orlesian nobles realised his identity, they began flocking around him. Carver passed Sebastian naturally deflecting invasive questions with his innocent focus on the Chantry, before Carver paused to bend down and pick up a coin from the ground.

"A caprice coin." Varric's height saved him from Carver's reflexive swing. "Easy there, Shiny. I'm only interested in actual money. What you have in your hand there is a fake lira."

Derived from the antiquated term *livre tournois*, liras were Orlais' formal currency. In someone else's past life, a similar monetary system had preceded the Italian lira and French franc. In Thedas, the lira was

prevalent in most countries due to Orlais' once expansive conquest of the south and interwoven economy with its neighbouring nations. As for caprices, it was an Orlesian high society game to toss the minted coin in a fountain to show others how many such collectibles one had. Leandra had been drawn to the game growing up as the young Amell heir, before her elopement to rural Ferelden had forcibly smothered the desire.

Carver quirked a brow at Varric's presence near his elbow. "So quick to abandon your audience, Tethras?"

"I promised to sign a few books," Varric chuckled, "but after a while, the fame wears on you. I thought I'd grab fresh air near the single person managing to drive other guests away with a scowl."

Carver relaxed his face self-consciously. "I'm not – scowling."

Varric gestured, and they strolled closer to the shade where Tallis was covertly lockpicking a door. Between them and the hydrangeas, no one would easily notice Tallis' interest in a sealed off area of the château. Garrett's party was supposed to mingle and distract guards to help the elf investigate a path to the château's vaults.

"No," Varric agreed, "but you're intimidating. Observe the young guests eyeing you from afar."

"Those would be the de Launcet sisters," Carver dismissed. "Likely seeking a flaw to loudly lament in this crowded venue. Give them three minutes and they'll forget me in favour of a spat with Bann Perrin standing in earshot of them."

Varric hummed. "Hawke has dealt with his fair share of insufferable nobility as a mercenary, then champion, but I can't conjure a similar excuse for you."

"I'm a soldier," Carver pointed out. "When the crown throws a ball, the king's army runs security."

"And you've never noticed your effect on young nobles?" Varric jerked his chin at the de Launcets. "When I said intimidated, I meant in a flattering way. Lady Hawke properly armed you for an Orlesian social function by fitting you with a sleeveless tunic. Poor girls can't approach you."

Carver's cheeks reddened. Upon reflection, Leandra *had* bemoaned Carver's refusal of further grooming after witnessing Leandra fret over

perfectly combing Garrett's hair back for an hour. Carver preferred his simple comma hairstyle.

"This isn't working," Tallis hissed as she stood up. "I've broken all of my lockpicking sets trying to breach blighted Orlesian security. Help me locate a key from a guard."

Carver and Varric split off to spread the word to the rest of their party. Carver caught sight of Garrett and Fenris awkwardly chatting with Seneschal Bran Cavin and Serendipity, an elven drag queen and Bran's significant other. Anyone with eyes could see Garrett and Fenris' magnetism towards each other, though Bran and Serendipity were quickly catching on that the pair weren't officially together. Dulci de Launcet was openly eavesdropping in equal parts curiosity and horror while her daughters started inching towards Bann Perrin. Carver coincidentally made eye contact with Eamon and Isolde Guerrin mingling behind the de Launcets before he quickly averted his gaze and scurried through a crowd of guests. He didn't give the arl and arlessa a chance to determine if they recognised his face.

Given the de Montforts' closeness with Orlais' ruling empress, it was little wonder that a few noteworthy nobles from Kirkwall and Ferelden were attending the party, if not at least out of obligation. Carver could hear the Orlesian bulk of the attendees whispering about how Viscount Marlowe Dumar had sent his seneschal to the social gathering in his stead. Marlowe's unstable grasp of Kirkwall's crown and even of his family fuelled intense gossip.

Suddenly, bright and gentle laughter tickled Carver's ears. Near the tiled resting area where sunlight bounced off the main building's windows, Carver approached the source of the sound.

"Leliana." Carver's heart warmed.

The red-haired bard's eyes lit up as she embraced him. "Carver, it's been years since I've had the pleasure of hearing your voice. What brings you here?"

"Business." They parted, and Carver held her gaze for a pointed second.

The nobles who had been speaking with Leliana sniffed. One in particular eyed Carver's orange clothing. "I don't know where you're from," the noble baldly lied, "but in proper company, one addresses another by their surname, like Sister Nightingale."



Of course. They thought “Carver” was his surname.

“I suppose I must wash away my shame with wine,” Carver sighed, stepping away for the courtyard’s corner with wine pitchers.

Leliana looped her arm around his. “Allow me to escort you.”

The nobles behind the two of them faintly squawked, rooted to their spot by etiquette. High society was favourably contradictory like that. Once Carver and Leliana found a quiet place out of earshot, they shared a quirk of their lips.

“You’re here for Rendon Howe,” Leliana deduced, absently fixing the folds of her lovely periwinkle gown. “I’m sorry to say I can’t help you locate him. Château Haine is famously grand for a remote country house or castle.”

“You’re merely attending this party to stay in touch with the Game.” Carver nodded in understanding. “How was the diplomatic ball that Lady Josephine Montilyet threw for you in Val Royeaux?”

“I won’t ask how you knew that,” Leliana good-naturedly huffed. “The ball was pleasant; Josie and I eventually left to seek a *real* party afterwards. Speaking of acquaintances you somehow know I’ll connect with, I forwarded your theory about Tranquility, Templars, and Seekers to my fellow Hand, Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast.”

That had been many months ago. Carver contained his nervousness. “I understand she has stepped away from the Seekers to serve as the Right Hand of Divines for years now.”

“The Seekers of Truth still learned of your theory,” Leliana assured. “After all, I also forwarded your notes to Divine Justinia. Her Holiness has since commissioned Cassandra and Pharamond, a Tranquil from the White Spire, to coordinate in researching not just how to reverse Tranquility but how to limit a mage’s magical ability without neutering their mind.”

Carver spluttered. “You told the *Divine!*?”

Carver’s potentially blasphemous notes had essentially reached southern Thedas’ *Pope*. The White Spire was also the largest Circle tower and Templar stronghold in southern Thedas, so massive that it could be seen from anywhere in Val Royeaux. Not a few considered the White Spire as the Chantry’s true home for the arcane. Divine Justinia wasn’t taking Carver’s thoughts lightly by using her influence

to commission someone from the White Spire.

Leliana amusedly continued. “Pharamond took to Seeker training like a fish in water. Cassandra says he’s the fastest in recorded history to complete the process and become a Seeker.” Tranquility afforded a laser focus needed for Seeker training, and having a Spirit of Faith touch a Tranquil’s mind would have then restored Pharamond’s original personality.

Carver moaned into his hands. “Do the Seekers know where this information originated?”

Leliana chuckled. “Only Her Eminence and Cassandra. I’m aware of your allergy to attention. Frankly, the entire subject is on a need-to-know basis, and even within the Seekers, only a few members are aware of what has been happening.”

“Resolutionists would otherwise spark violence with barely a *rumour* of all this,” Carver noted, lifting his gaze. Resolutionists were a terrorist offshoot of Libertarians, a fraternity founded on the belief that the Circle should be an autonomous order independent of the Chantry. “Regarding a method of limiting a mage’s ability, is the Divine debating a change to its intended target?”

A deadpan look answered him. “You aren’t content with *one* controversial opinion?”

Carver sighed. “I have a request for Pha— Seeker Pharamond, if it’s possible to reach him.” At Leliana’s encouraging nod, he continued. “There’s a senior enchanter in the White Spire named Rhys. If inexplicable events ever haunt the tower, Rhys might find his curiosity in wandering spirits end up painting him as a prime suspect for the events. If the Templars set a curfew before then, someone should ensure Rhys observes it to avoid such misfortune.”

Leliana stared at him. “You deduced as much?”

How could he disguise his knowledge? “Rhys shares his mother’s open-mindedness – and inquisitiveness – of spirits, putting him at risk of taking the blame for supernatural events where there are no other suspects. The paper trail is thin, but...Rhys is the product of Wynne and a Templar’s forbidden union, taken from Wynne while she was still weak on the birthing bed. The White Spire has also hosted its fair share of arcane tragedies. The Veil is thin there.”

Leliana paused. “...Share your request with Seeker Pharamond

yourself.” She met his gaze meaningfully, then changed the topic. “Did you know he’s a friend of Wynne’s? ...Silly question, forget I asked.”

“Hey.” Carver bumped her shoulder. “Tell me about Solona. I can’t predict anything when it comes to you two.”

“She’s busy,” Leliana sighed. “Ever since the Blight, the Wardens at Soldier’s Peak have been reporting Solo’s and Avernus’ discoveries in blood magic to Weisshaupt, per the First Warden’s command. Solo suspects that the First Warden is starting to entertain the idea of summoning them to the Anderfels. Avernus is living proof that it’s possible for wardens to delay their Calling, and though we’ve made our peace, Solo’s eventual demise casts a shadow over our heads. Solo recently confessed to me that she’s ready to commit to dedicated research into the Calling, even if the study summons her far away.”

Due to the Grey Wardens’ political isolation, Leliana and Solona communicated through secret channels afforded by Leliana’s bardic skills. Carver couldn’t otherwise track how his warden friends were doing. His sense of honour for the Order’s laws also restrained him from abusing his connections.

“I admire you two,” Carver shared. “Few can maintain a long-distance relationship like you and Solona. Your bond is strong.”

Leliana smiled sweetly. “Thank you, Carver. My love is always with me.”

Garrett approached them at that moment with loose limbs and crinkled eyes. “Carver, there you are.”

Garrett wouldn’t be looking for Carver unless it was related to Tallis’ mission. Carver sighed and gestured. “Leliana, this is my older brother, Garrett Hawke. Garrett, this is Leliana Nightingale, the one who wrote the...Carver songs.”

Twin bewildered stares met his introduction.

“You have a *brother*?” Leliana nudged him.

“You *know* someone here?” Garrett gaped, turning. “Sister Leliana, I recognise you from the few months you served in Lothering’s Chantry before the blight hit. I don’t believe you’ve met my brother...unless you travelled with the Hero of Ferelden. Maker!”

Leliana giggled. “I was also there when Carver threw Elissa under the

cart and decreed her the Hero so that he could escape a promotion.”

Carver shot her a despairing look.

A smirk briefly ghosted Leliana’s face as she placed a mouth over her hand. “How unfortunate that no one seems to believe that my tributes to Carver refer to the same person. Hard work in tragic times deserves recognition, don’t you agree Champion?”

Leliana was manipulating Carver, he just knew it. “I did eventually accept the promotion,” Carver grumbled.

“To be the captain of Maric’s Shield,” Leliana giggled. “You’re neglecting to sport the Theirin crest in order to lure Rendon Howe out of hiding with the belief that you don’t have back-up.”

“Garrett has his own responsibilities here,” Carver corrected, “which is why I’m hoping you stored away more than extra ruffles in that gown.”

“And Summer Sword?” Leliana queried.

“Relieved from me at the château gates,” Carver lamented. “Duke de Montfort takes his security seriously.”

Leliana fixed a red strand of hair behind her ear. “What would you do without me?”

“Fight with a steak knife,” Carver replied with a glance at the charcuterie and sweets table. He watched Leliana weave her way towards the same door Tallis had struggled lockpicking. “How about you, Garrett? Do you plan to sneak your way to the vaults or blast your way through?”

Garrett was gaping. “*Captain of—!?*”

Carver grabbed the nearest dessert and stuffed it into Garrett’s mouth. Based on Garrett’s quick swallow and the smear of white icing around his lips, it had been a red velvet cupcake. Lucky.

Garrett furiously wiped his mouth with the edge of his sleeve, uncaring of Leandra’s opinion if she learned of it. “Instead of you, I should just listen to rumours *about* you, seeing as they’re more honest!”

“I said I had been busy,” Carver defended. “I wanted to tell you in

chunks.”

Sunlight bounced into Garrett and Carver’s eyes, drawing them to Tallis standing afar with a silver tray she had stolen from a servant. The spy revealed a key behind the tray, then jerked her chin to the closest door to her. Fenris, Varric, Sebastian, and Charade covertly met Garrett’s gaze across the courtyard before returning to their conversations with guests, guards, or Leandra and Gamlen, keeping attention off of Garrett. The Hawke brothers began strolling through the courtyard.

Carver lowered his voice. “Which will it be?”

“...Stealth,” Garrett groused.

Carver nodded, breaking away for where Leliana had vanished to. “I’ll draw the guards’ attention away.”

X

“Clear!”

“Room clear, what have you got?”

“Coming to you.”

“Stairwell, stairwell.”

“Clearing stairwell.”

“Enemy down!”

“Clear!”

Carver and Leliana booked their way through a small Orlesian castle with flying arrows and flashing swords. Where Garrett and Tallis would be sneaking their way *down* to the château’s vaults, Carver and Leliana were clearing floors *up* to where a political figure seeking asylum would stay – and drawing the château’s security to them while they were at it. To ascend the château fast enough to evade capture or death, Carver and Leliana had to cut down six chevaliers and the occasional Howe legionnaire at a time.

“This brings me back to Redcliffe Castle,” Leliana giggled as they burst down another door.

Carver sliced his mental pie and met Leliana in the middle, where

they continued running through the rooms. “The undead army were less equipped than chevaliers. Less skilled, too.”

Orlais had access to larger furnaces than Ferelden, allowing the country more industrial armour and weapons.

“The undead were more numerous, though,” Leliana reminisced.

The Chantry sister had snuck a bow, quiver, and daggers into a château’s storage room expecting that she would only be attending a party. It seemed that Leliana missed a certain level of action.

Rendon Howe himself was visibly shocked that an ostensible Orlesian socialite would slice his guards’ necks open with daggers. Carver unleashed a wrath of heaven before Rendon could throw himself out of a window in escape. The pillar of blinding holy light stunned Rendon as it struck him, knocking him into a table as he suffered a sudden loss of balance and a concussion.

Carver threw Rendon to the ground face-down. “Rendon Howe, by order of His Majesty the king, you’re to face the Ferelden courts for treason.”

Leliana tore a strip from her gown that wasn’t already split for easier movement, and handed it to Carver for binding Rendon’s wrists together. While Carver stood the former arl up, Leliana noted pieces of parchment on the nearby table.

“He was planning to sell Ferelden out to pro-annexation Orlesian nobles, like Duke Prosper de Montfort.”

Carver clicked his tongue and hauled the stunned Rendon over his shoulder. “As if I don’t have enough reason to subject the duke and his wyvern to my brother.”

Leliana raised a brow. “The duke and...his wyvern?”

“Don’t ask.” Carver perked up at the sound of chevaliers stomping for their direction. “Window?”

Leliana grinned and tied curtains together for a rope. “Window.”

They raced and leapt down rooftops until they finally landed in a cushion of hydrangeas in a separate courtyard from the party. The heavily armoured chevaliers barked down at them in vain protest from upper floor windows and wall-walks. At one point, Carver and

Leliana had torn a de Montfort banner to swing themselves to a lower level, and a few chevaliers were now clinging to a bundle of blue and gold cloth, having given chase only to realise how high they were. Carver fixed his sword belt over his finery before sheathing Summer Sword, then rolled a bleary Rendon off of the bushes to return over Carver's shoulder. Leliana tore the lower half of her gown off to reveal pants underneath, and with a bow and quiver slung over her shoulder, the bard could have recently strolled out of the hunting grounds.

They found their way to Leandra and Gamlen's side before Carver cleared his throat. "Mother, I must depart from the party early."

Leandra and a few guests gasped at the sight of them. The Hawke matriarch whispered heatedly. "Carver, what have you done?"

"Work." Carver placed a reassuring hand on her elbow before she could intuitively search for Garrett in the courtyard. "Brother is currently occupied with Duke de Montfort."

"Where?" Leandra reluctantly calmed.

Carver coughed. "...Jail? He'll be free soon." Fenris, Varric, Sebastian, and Charade were inconspicuously absent from the party. "It's politics, Mother, you know how it is. Would you like to follow me back home to Kirkwall, or would you like to return with Garrett and the rest?"

Leandra noticed Leliana's presence and smiled weakly in confusion.

"This is Sister Leliana Nightingale," Carver quickly added. "She's a friend from – work."

Though bewildered, Leandra and Gamlen politely exchanged greetings with the Chantry sister. Leandra peered at her. "Sister Nightingale, you look...familiar."

The remark was merely answered with a smile. "Lady Hawke."

Rendon began regaining his bearings and struggled in Carver's grip. "Blighted...little...bird...!"

Carver dropped his caprice coin in Leandra's hands and stepped away. "I'll see you at home, Mother, Uncle. Toss a coin in the fountain for me."

As Carver briskly moved for the château gates, Isolde opened her mouth in passing. "You...?"

Leliana quickly intercepted the arlessa for polite conversation. Carver gratefully slipped around a corner before bolting for Prosper's stables. Leandra needed the carriage that the Hawkes had rented, after all. Besides, Carver was expecting some guests in Kirkwall soon regarding Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard.

## Chapter End Notes

Sebastian's formalwear is based on [@siriusdraws' fan art](#) of Sebastian and his brothers.

The creatures on the [Vael heraldry](#) are as interesting to look at as they are mysterious. If anyone would like to take a gander on what they are, leave a comment!



# Holding Out

## Chapter Notes

Just a reminder: Seheron is conquered Qunari territory, while Par Vollen is the Qunari homeland. The Antaam is most active in Seheron. The Triumvirate resides in Par Vollen.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Come, Brute.” Carver tucked a tin of cookies under his arm and strolled out of the market, Brute quickly by his side.

Carver didn’t look back at his contact manning the stall he had left, nor did his contact say farewell after Carver paid for his goods. Save for Isabela, no one in Kirkwall knew of Carver’s connection with the merchant, though Carver and Antonella weren’t shy to play up to their stumblingly romantic image when needed. The roles helped explain their painstakingly subtle exchange of letters, should anyone catch their slights of hand.

Regardless, today was Carver’s last day in Kirkwall if Nails had anything to say about it. In Carver’s written exchange assuring the commander that his captain was alive, Nails had blown through denial, negotiation, rage, until finally acceptance of Carver’s absence from Denerim. After all, securing the stability of Ferelden’s neighbours was related to checking Ferelden’s safety. However, even exaggeration had its limits within the bounds of professionalism. Carver was due to expeditiously return to Denerim, *yesterday*.

Bodahn swung the estate door open. “Ser Carver, welcome back!”

“Bodahn, Sandal.” Carver nodded to the Feddics as he entered the Hawke estate.

Brute bounded ahead of Carver for his room, where Carver blinked at the sight of Garrett and all of his friends sprawled across the space, lounging. Isabela darted past Carver and threw herself into his bed with a snicker and his coin purse in hand.

Carver sighed, setting his tin down on a table. “If you run away with that, I’ll be forced to kill you.”

Isabela giggled excitedly. “Reaaaaaally, what’s in here?” She opened the purse, murmuring, and fished out a wooden stamp. “Coins, a

key...and something with dogs on it? Very Ferelden.”

Sebastian stared. “Isabela, that’s the crest of the Ferelden royal family.”

Isabela whipped a sparkling gaze to Carver. “How did you get this? Wait, if you tell me, you’ll have to kill me?”

“He’s in Maric’s Shield.” Garrett looked at his brother. “Carver is its captain.”

Next to the doorway where Carver kept his weapons, Aveline unsheathed Carver’s sword enough to reveal its engraving. “Summer Sword.”

A stunned silence fell.

Carver quickly interjected. “I take it all of you have *nothing* to do today?”

“Oh no you don’t!” Anders interjected. “No deflection this time! Based on news across the Waking Sea, you’ve been running Maric’s Shield since you were *eighteen!*?”

Carver groaned, flopping into his armchair with red cheeks. “Does no one respect privacy anymore? Why are all of you in my room?”

Garrett scoffed. “We’ve all been busy. Only now do I have time to update everyone on what happened at the château.”

“*In my room?*” Carver repeated.

Merrill fiddled with her hands. “Some privacy was desired.”

Carver sighed at the confession. Ever since the hunting party, the general public had been stirring at the news that Garrett had killed an anti-Ferelden Orlesian noble somehow embroiled with the Qunari before his death. The hot topic only elevated Garrett’s reputation to greater heights. Love him or hate him, the Champion of Kirkwall moved decisively in political matters – a stark contrast to Marlowe Dumar who was guilty of cautiousness. Garrett’s inner circle had begun receiving attention by default. Charade was content disappearing into Garrett’s shadow, though her participation in the event had reached some ears pricked towards the last living Amells’ affairs. The bon ton’s burning curiosity over Charade’s choker had already earned the young woman and her father countless invitations

to soirées and tea parties.

Carver was secretly working with Celene to pass Prosper's château on to Garrett via a law of chivalry, given Garrett *had* beaten Prosper in combat. Celene had been unhappy to learn that Prosper had been fraternising with the pro-annexation Gaspard behind her back.

Varric leaned back in Carver's other armchair. "Tell me something I don't know about the Deep Roads."

Carver groaned. "What do you want, Tethras?"

"Honest insight on an unknown topic," Varric chuckled, crossing his arms. "You've been holding out on the rest of us."

Carver frowned. "Remember when we rescued Yevhen's sons?"

"You found that runed sword," Isabela piped up, "and five golems. A shame, really. That sword would have served better in the hands of a warrior instead of a conciliator like Emrys. Or better yet, traded for good coin."

Carver watched Aveline admire Vercenne's engraving. "I've met the one who smithed Heartdrinker before."

Varric raised a brow at him. "The sword was as old as the First Blight."

Carver didn't refute it. "Paragon Caridin surrendered a normal life in stopping Emperor Valtor from creating more golems. He believed no future was worth making unwilling sacrifices out of fellow countrymen. In Paragon Caridin's last moments, he joined his stone brethren with the peace that such sacrifices would never be made again."

"Alright, *that* one's a lie," Anders accused, but Justice denied it.

"I sense no malice," the cat commented.

"Paragon Caridin," Carver continued, "would have been happy to know that one of his creations fell into the hands of a soft-hearted man like Emrys."

"How did you do it?" Merrill watched him with wide, curious eyes. "End the werewolves in the Brecilian Forest?"

Carver stiffened. "That's — I can't——"

Fenris snorted. "Humility here would be fruitless."

"The details affect the lives of many." Carver ran his hands down the wrinkles of his clothes. "This is deeper than my honour as a knight. I'm sorry, you must content yourself with what Clan Siona has chosen to share with the People."

Merrill blinked, startled. "By word of mouth, Fen'halam is said to have led a few wardens into the Brecilian Forest. There, they fought an entire pack of werewolves for seventeen days and seventeen nights, before finally slaying the last of the beasts. Upon the end of the creatures' taint on the land, the forest breathed life anew. Clan Siona heard the forest's wisdom and moved on to new lands for a home."

Aveline lowered Summer Sword and looked at Merrill. "Your clan trusts the details of stories passed second-hand?"

"Our ways are rooted in oral tradition," Merrill stated. "The Keeper and the First bear the grave responsibility of sharp memory. In exchanges between clans' Keepers, words are as gold — precious and powerful." She turned to Carver. "The stories never hinted at a second truth."

Varric nodded. "The wolfsbane song made you out to be a warrior who shoots lightning from his eyes and has the strength of a dozen men in each hand. Funny enough, no one can agree on Wolfsbane's race or gender, considering the tale's origins."

"The victory is the elves'." Weariness settled behind Carver's eyes. "As is the tragedy. I can say no more."

"What of the warden song?" Sebastian remarked, intrigued. "The Hanged Man sings it now and then, but makes no mention of a golem paragon. The song instead celebrates your valour for braving a fortress infested with darkspawn in order to find Paragon Branka's remains, and lay them to rest in the Stone."

Garrett cocked a brow. "I didn't realise you enjoyed music outside of the Chant, Vael."

Sebastian smiled softly. "The Maker has set things into motion so long ago, we oft miss his hand in the present. Any sound of His creatures' goodness warms my heart. A dwarven lay brother in Orzammar sought to share the Chant's joy so sincerely, he established a Chantry in his home with help of a Ser Carver. His account lines up with the Warden Carver song."

Carver dithered when gazes turned his way. "...All true. Warden Elissa and the rest of us had hoped to instead find Paragon Branka and escort her back to Orzammar, but the Deep Roads eventually claimed her. Oghren Kondrat thus returned his former wife to the Stone."

Carver had never sat and listened to Leliana's tributes to him all the way through, but he was grateful that the bard had seen fit to exclude mention of broodmothers. Upon reflection, Leliana had likely written the songs to lift folks' spirits, embarrass Carver, and encourage his self-confidence in equal measure, considering Solona had been present to contribute to the lyrics. Ever since their journey from Redcliffe to Ostagar, the two women had been teasingly honest around him.

"I also remember Brother Burkel," Carver admitted. "His Chantry was already developing last I saw."

"You're fibbing," Garrett spluttered, turning to Sebastian. "The both of you. A Chantry dwarf brother in Orzammar?"

Sebastian's face glowed. "The Maker's song can enlighten all hearts who hear."

The door suddenly erupted with knocking, before Carver sat up and opened it to reveal Bodahn. "Pardon me, messeres. Harbormaster Liam sent an errand boy requesting for Messere Hawke? Apparently the First Enchanter and a few mages crossed over from the Gallows, before the Knight-Commander and her Templars intercepted them in the name of public order."

Unified groans responded to the news.

Bodahn nervously stroked his beard. "The Knight-Commander and First Enchanter are, ah, caught in a spirited debate."

Aveline shot out the door, stomping. "Public order as if. You there, errand boy! Send for Lieutenant Hendyr and a squadron of guardsmen!"

Carver quickly made way for the orange-haired soldier. Kirkwall's economy still needed to be able to run while the skirts were having a fit, to say nothing of Kirkwall's public face before international parties sailing in and out of the harbour. Garrett's presence in the politically tangled knot would do *wonders* as the steady Champion. Carver expressed as much with a look at his brother and a swift equipment of his sword.

Garrett bolted to his feet and grumbled the entire way to the docks.

X

Meredith and Orsino's voices grew clearer and louder the closer the party drew, until finally they witnessed Meredith abruptly step into Orsino's face with bared teeth.

"Blood mages!" Orsino mocked in response, gesturing sharply. "You see them everywhere! My people cannot sneeze without receiving such accusations!"

Garrett raised his voice at Orsino's sudden square-up with his Templar counterpart. "Woah! The way you two go at it, people will talk."

Meredith snapped. "You have no business here, Champion."

"Why not involve him?" Orsino interjected. "The people of Kirkwall deserve to know that you abuse the Order's powers as the Chantry's right arm in magic."

Garrett blinked rapidly. "I don't speak to or for the people—"

Except pertaining unfounded gossip like Meredith and Orsino kissing, apparently.

"Then let us seek the Grand Cleric's wisdom!" Orsino moved for the Chantry.

Meredith cut him off, her Templars rippling behind her in parallel movement. "You'll not disturb Her Grace with a pointless debate!"

Aveline and a squad of her guardsmen strolled in, establishing a perimeter. The dockworkers and ferryman began clearing the space with darting eyes.

Carver sighed at the scene. The Templar Order had been conducting its own internal investigations of disloyal members for decades. Meredith's strictness with both mages and Templars was still being tolerated because her attitude hadn't developed without inspiration. In Garrett's first interaction with Knight-Captain Cullen, long before Carver's arrival to Kirkwall, Cullen had been caught trying to scare a confession out of a Templar recruit named Wilmod for secretly meeting up with escaped Circle mages. Cullen had felt compelled to make the threat feel genuine.

The incident proved that Cullen had been conditioned to think the method was appropriate for a knight-captain. He had probably suffered the same treatment in Ferelden's Circle to force him to admit that he had liked Solona, and had likewise received punishment for "sympathising" with a mage. Cullen's transfer to Kirkwall's Circle could have been Greagoir's best attempt at calming the scarred man. Ferelden was guilty of loose oversight, considering it was host to four knight-commanders, three of which were let loose to check on chantries and lead hunts for apostates. Knight-Commander Harrieth could even secretly maintain a partnership with the Lucrosian Mage's Collective.

To Carver's understanding, Ferelden's Circle nowadays knew to write letters to Wynne in Tevinter if they wanted Circle authorities to be cut back down to size. One could hardly argue logic with the first enchanter currently researching how to reverse the creation of golems and other supposedly impossible science. Greagoir and Irving sometimes sent Carver energetic letters considering his friendship with Wynne, but the two men always ultimately cowed upon receiving Wynne's response. She liked to remind them that without her prompting, they themselves had allowed Finn to indefinitely leave Kinloch Hold in the name of research. Greagoir and Irving could hardly eat their actions *now*. Wynne's involvement in the genius Dagna's recruitment into the Circle also mollified them.

Varric nudged Carver and murmured. "You keep glancing at the Twins, Shiny."

Carver sighed. "Just hoping I have the date right."

"For what?"

"...Preventing a war?"

The Twins was the colloquial term for the two bronze statues guarding Kirkwall's channel. All ships in and out of Kirkwall had to pass between them.

"Maybe the Qunari will invade a second time," Merrill suggested, "and give those two a reason to fight together again."

Carver blinked, turning his gaze from the statues to Meredith and Orsino. Even with Garrett present, their debate was escalating, and the Templars and mages behind the pair likewise stirred with stimulated energy. Carver's heart picked up at a glimpse of Bethany in the shifting crowd.

Isabela held a hand to her chest. “Don’t even joke about that, kitten. If I never see a qunari again, it’ll be too long.”

“They won’t fight together,” Carver murmured, eyes straying to sparks in the tip of Orsino’s staff. Mages were driven by emotion. “I’ve seen it before in Ostagar. Chaos can divide just as well as it can unite.”

Templars had struck mages down in reflexive fear, despite the fact that the archdemon had been to blame for sudden fire. With frayed tempers among Orsino’s count, particularly Orsino himself, the debate was a disaster waiting to happen.

Aveline joined them in that moment and cursed under her breath at Carver’s statement. She rigidly motioned an elf with a nicked ear over.

Varric blinked. “Gallard?”

“I’ve said it before,” Aveline commented. “You want to be good at this job, you pay attention to what’s missing and when people arrange escape routes.”

The gambler from the Hanged Man smirked at Varric as he strolled over. “You’re not my only colourful contact, Tethras.”

Fenris shrugged when Varric caught the look between them. “Donnic and I sometimes play diamondback.”

“And Hendyr is a sore loser.” Gallard chuckled quietly at Aveline.

“Chaos is good for no one,” Aveline steered them back on track. “Gallard, no one can be throwing rocks at this time.”

The Coterie accountant grumbled. “Distractions serve us best in theft, but I see your point, Guard-Captain.”

Isabela watched the man walk away. “He uses you to arrest his rivals.”

“I arrest anyone with sufficient evidence,” Aveline sniffed, “and when it gets tough, I send Hawke.”

With Garrett’s mine lucrative for all parties involved, even the Coterie knew when to cut losses. Isabela snickered at Aveline’s cold cleverness.

Anders tossed a look at Carver. “What of you, *Captain*? Does the king’s army share an understanding with extra-legal parties?”



Carver spoke flatly. “No comment.”

Magic suddenly flared among the crowd of mages, and everyone jumped. Garrett interceded while half of the Templars and mages reflexively drew their weapons and were already attacking.

“Keep your emotions in *check*, for Maker’s sake!” Garrett hastily blocked a blow with his staff.

Violence and yelling erupted at the docks, crashing like a tidal wave into a full-blown fight.

“Enchanter, *you* tell him—!”

“Don’t you bring my sister into this!”

Fenris jerked forward. “That’s my cue.”

The party quickly drew their weapons and hurried to Garrett’s side or to block the fighting off from reaching civilians. Carver clicked his tongue at the mayhem. A mage’s emotional outburst had manifested into a harmless flare of magic, much like the shot heard ‘round the world.

Bethany’s voice filtered through the air. “Brother, all citizens must be allowed at least the freedom to publically gather— Carver!”

Merrill earnestly turned to him. “I believe that’s *your* cue?”

“Behind me,” Carver tersely replied and hammered a wrath of heaven upon a cluster of people.

Templar or mage, they all fell over stunned. Carver quickly switched places with Merrill who freely cast her magic without Carver’s natural dampening, and imprisoned several Templars in mid-swing with conjured stone. Anders twirled his staff before Carver threw a hand out in front of him.

“But—” Anders protested.

“Fireballs can’t solve everything!” Carver intoned.

The blonde whined. “Then at least let me kick the shit out of diseases!”

“I believe those people need healing,” Sebastian offered with a nod to incapacitated mages.

Justice pounced on a Templar's face before they could attack the mages, while Anders rushed over with glowing hands. Aveline disarmed a Templar with honed experience, startling the Templar, before raising her shield flat to the sky and crouching down. Isabela wordlessly ran at the proffered mount and leapt over a volley of arrows before ambushing a line of Templars from behind. The two women cut the legs out from under their opponents together. Garrett and Bethany meanwhile telekinetically wiped out the obstacles in their path for Orsino and Meredith, who were in a clash of holy and elemental power. The cliffsides around Kirkwall's docks flashed with blinding light. A nearby ship caught on fire.

"What a mess," Carver muttered under his breath, before an opening in the crowd revealed Garrett tackling Bethany away from an attack in her blindspot.

Meredith rose a glowing red sword over their heads.

**"NO!"** Carver cried out.

**"AGGGHHH!"**

Suddenly, the knight-commander staggered. Her sword slipped out of her hands and fell point-first into the ground with a twang, Meredith's knees quickly following. The woman heaved on all fours as her veins bulged up her neck and temple. Orsino seized up next with a clutch of his heart, drawing the stunned attention of the Templars and mages around them. The fighting wavered.

**"Enough."**

Dockworkers, guardsmen, Templars, and mages parted before the arrival of Cassandra *Maker-loving* Pentaghash.

Men and women in Seeker armour streamed in from behind the Right Hand of the Divine. She lowered a fist, and Meredith and Orsino caught their breaths with sudden relief. Cassandra had used her unique Seeker ability to set the lyrium in a person's blood aflame.

Cullen hastily straightened, nearly dropping his sword to salute. "Seekers!"

"Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard," Cassandra bellowed. "First Enchanter Orsino. You are both hereby stripped of your rank and deported to Val Royeaux for criminal investigation. Kirkwall's Circle and Order are under Seeker supervision, now."

The Seekers spread out to detain the two accused and split up the Templars and mages.

Meredith picked herself up with a hand on her pommel and slapped the Seekers' hands away. "What!? How can that be!"

Cassandra stood at rest, pointing her chin at the red idol infused with Meredith's sword, then at Orsino. "*You* are in possession of an illegal and highly volatile material – and *you*, Orsino, encouraged and equipped a serial killer by the name of Quentin. There are written correspondence and banned blood magic tomes from yours and Quentin's living spaces that point to your contribution to unholy experiments."

Orsino spluttered while a pair of Seekers bound his wrists together behind his back.

Bethany picked herself up with Garrett's help. "Quentin, as in the one who nearly killed Mother? First Enchanter, did you really...?"

"No, that's—" Orsino stammered as he was forcibly marched past Cassandra. "Where's your evidence? Where did you find the evidence—!?"

Cassandra briefly met gazes with Carver while he was sheathing his sword.

Meredith caught the eye contact. She stood up, jerking away from restraining grips. "Pardon, Seeker, but I suspect the boy isn't a member of the Chantry."

Cassandra followed Meredith's gaze to Carver, and snorted. "If you mean by him not being a Templar, then you would suspect correctly. Ser Carver is the knight of Maric's Shield who travelled with the Divine's Left Hand and ended the Fifth Blight. He is a credible source of information claiming the presence of blighted lyrium in Kirkwall."

Meredith processed Cassandra's statement and abruptly dropped her sword in such shock and revulsion, her face contorted unrecognisably. "*Blighted lyrium!?*"

Bethany whipped a gaze between Carver and Garrett. "*Maric's Shield?*"

Carver cleared his throat while Meredith was unwillingly jockeyed to the Seekers' ship. "Regardless, these arrests affect Kirkwall's major institutions. I'm compelled to report them to the viscount."

“No need.” In that moment, Marlowe Dumar briskly strode in accompanied by a complement of guardsmen and a certain Antivan merchant, who subtly slowed down and vanished into the onlooking crowd. Carver’s messenger had acted in time. “As if Kirkwall isn’t troubled by enough scandal! What’s this I hear about arrests, Seeker—? *Bride of the Maker!*”

A qunari dreadnought sailed in between the Twins.

Carver stepped in. “Viscount Dumar, they come on formal business.”

“Ser Carver,” Marlowe weakly recognised while his guards caught him from fainting. “You drink tea with my son – and harass me about traveller records.”

Carver coughed. “What we discussed about your son has reached the point of action. These new arrivals are my contacts.”

Marlowe slowly straightened, sorrowful eyes watching the ship dock. “Ah. It is time, then.”

Garrett, Bethany, and most all of Garrett’s friends regrouped with Carver and Marlowe. Around them, Aveline barked orders at her guardsmen, Anders healed the injured, and Sebastian allayed civilians’ worries over the recent outburst. A crowd of skirts and armour shuffled around and with the Seekers like frenzied ants. The docks had suddenly become the site to several unlikely parties all meeting in one place. At the centre, a cluster of Seekers carefully extracted Meredith’s corrupted sword from the ground to be boxed and locked away for careful study. Carver – and Leliana – had suggested the wardens of Soldier’s Peak.

“Carver,” Garrett furiously whispered. “*What in Maker’s name.*”

“Ser Carver, Viscount Dumar.” Cassandra strolled up to stand alongside them. Marlowe returned her nod.

“Seeker,” Carver greeted without tearing his eyes from the approaching painted and horned figures. “I nearly feared you would not arrive as Leliana timed.”

Cassandra snorted, which seemed to surprise those around her. Carver could admit the tall warrior was intimidating. “And subject the Circle here to you for a day longer? Test not the Maker’s mercy. I must at least have certain faith in you, to sail ahead of a qunari dreadnought into Kirkwall’s harbour.”

Carver placed a hand on his satchel. “They’re here for the Tome of Koslun and a genuine convert, Saemus Dumar.” Marlowe leaked a pained sigh at his son’s name. “They have also come to coordinate with Kirkwall’s main powers and remove the sunken dreadnought in the coast.”

Cassandra raised a brow at Carver and Marlowe. “The main powers, meaning the viscount’s office.”

“And the Seekers,” Marlowe fretfully cut in, mind racing. “Without a knight-commander or first enchanter, Kirkwall will feel the absence of stability up-top more than ever! Oh dear, oh dear....”

Carver glanced at Bethany. “If the Chantry chooses to reform the Circle one day, the Divine will initially call on only first enchanters to meet about it.”

Cassandra hummed and called out to one of the figures who was unwittingly laying down order, besides Aveline. “Knight-Captain!”

Cullen wearily trotted over. “Seeker?”

“The Seekers need streamlined communication with the Order here,” Cassandra stated. “With Stannard under investigation, you’re promoted to knight-commander.”

Bethany pounced. “Orsino never appointed a successor so far as anyone can recall – right, Knight-*Commander*? Should a replacement be required, Seeker, I would be humbled to accept the position and help straighten out wrinkles as they transpire.”

Cullen stammered at his sudden authority. “Enchanter Hawke *does* share amicable relations with most of the Circle, Seeker.”

“These are rare circumstances,” Cassandra stated. “Enchanter Hawke, I as Seeker promote you to First Enchanter.”

Bethany beamed and hastily left the group with Cullen to organise the flustered crowd.

Garrett quietly watched her flit off. “What have I just witnessed?”

Apprehension rippled through the docks as qunari finally drew near to Marlowe, Cassandra, and Carver. The qunari were all clad in the braided rope, cloth, and leather of beresaad armour, save for the towering, hornless figure leading the group. Intricately braided ropes

along the shoulders and exposed abs highlighted equally detailed vitaar patterns on the leader's grey skin, elevating him to a higher rank. A sheathed greatsword as tall as a human male hung on his back. Carver knew that from the side, the weapon would look as long and thin as a clothesline.

The group of qunari came to a halt, before the leader inclined his head. "Kadan."

"Arishok." Carver's chest warmed, inspiring a glow and small smile on his face. "I know Seheron is expanding its range of sweets, so I bought a box of assorted cookies to help. Sadly, however, it's not on me right now."

"Maraas kata," Sten, now Arishok replied smoothly. "I brought tea from Par Vollen. We should share in our wealth."

Garrett interrupted. "Unfortunately, tea time will have to wait. Carver, would you like to introduce the rest of us?"

Arishok's eyes turned less soft as they shifted to Marlowe who was wearing the black diadem of Kirkwall's viscount, Cassandra who bore the all-seeing eye symbol of the Seekers, then Garrett and the rest. "I come only for the Tome of Koslun, a viddathari, and to facilitate communication between Seheron and Kirkwall regarding the removal of a sunken dreadnought."

"Another Arishok...?" Marlowe echoed faintly.

Said qunari looked at the viscount. "Several months ago, my predecessor's growing inclination towards uncontrolled behaviour was made known to Par Vollen. His unsanctioned invasion settled the question of a court-martial. The former Arishok would have been dead whether or not he had claimed victory against the basalit-an called Champion. I have since been appointed to the position."

A month ago, the actions of a Salit and the possible actions of a Tallis had also reached certain ears. Primarily Arishok's. It had been a gesture of goodwill to help convince the Ariqun that the Arishok's friend gave trustworthy information when he did. Had Tallis not killed Salit and retrieved his scrolls, then hidden Ben-Hassrath would have. Garrett's contribution just helped prove that the previous Arishok's label of him as basalit-an was earned. Arishok's presence in Kirkwall would truthfully only last the time required to establish steps for removing the dreadnought's remains; he was returning to Par Vollen as soon as possible, leaving behind the necessary beresaad to continue

the work.

Carver revealed the Tome of Koslun and extended it to his friend. “I knew you would.”

“You contacted me for a reason.” Arishok gestured, and a beresaad stepped forward to accept the tome with a bow. While the individual beresaad departed to return to the ship, Arishok turned to Carver. “The viddathari?”

This time, Marlowe did collapse, and several of Garrett’s friends reflexively tried to catch him. “Saemus, my boy, oh...!”

Varric awkwardly retreated from the emotional viscount. “I’ll, uh, notify the kid.”

“I’ll go with you,” Isabela blurted and quickly disappeared with Varric.

“I can do this no more,” Marlowe moaned. “My personal life has suffered for it. Messere Hawke!”

Carver and it seemed half of the dock froze at the address. In the Free Marches, nobles were called lord or lady, except rulers of a city-state; the very traditional or Orlesian among them could insist on being referred to as a comte or comtesse. For everyone else, “serah” referred to one of equal or lower station, while “messere” referred to one of higher station.

Marlowe continued weepily. “The Amells are the oldest family in the city. I have no heirs, and the nobility unanimously recognised you in their declaration of a Champion. *You* are the viscount of Kirkwall now!”

Garrett hastily caught the black crown pushed into his chest. Aveline and a couple guardsmen stepped in to pick the frail Marlowe up from the ground and escort him aside. The guard-captain stayed to level Garrett, Carver, Cassandra, and Arishok with a flat look.

“What happened?” Aveline demanded.

Garrett stared. “I believe I have a real job, now.”

## Chapter End Notes

I surpassed my word limit, so I’m splitting the rest of the content

off for the next chapter. Thank you for your support!



# Recommendation

## Chapter Notes

A bit of a transition chapter. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Carver blinked at the figure between him and a qunari dreadnought. In the span of time it took for Carver to grab his tin of cookies from the Hawke estate, update Leandra and the Amells of recent events, and return to the docks, Garrett had fitted a black crown to his head, smudged his fingers and cheek with ink, and gained a degree of wildness in his eyes. Bran Cavin and other staff from the viscount's office were racing around the docks with stacks of papers. Every other minute, an official in a similar state as Garrett would thrust documents into his face demanding for his opinion or signature.

The Champion of Kirkwall looked frazzled.

Carver raised a brow. "It has only been an hour or so."

Garrett spluttered. "I didn't ask to become a blighted *viscount!*"

Arishok stepped out of the dreadnought behind Garrett and crossed his arms. "I still require a summary of laws the Qunari must observe in order to retrieve our sunken dreadnought."

Bran exasperatedly yelled from the distance. "We're working on it!"

Garrett looked at Arishok. "I'm surprised the Qunari care."

"We are not invading," Arishok curtly stated.

Carver moved for the dreadnought. "Sounds like all of you need a break. I've brought cookies, Arishok."

Garrett cut him off. "Let's take a step back here, *kadan*."

Carver snorted at his curtness. "We're not romantically involved, Garrett." He chose to refrain from mentioning the time a certain Sten had sucked poison out of his neck. It would evoke misunderstandings.

"Oh, is *that* what it means!?" Garrett spluttered.

Arishok grunted. "It is also a term for 'friends.'"

Carver knew that Arishok disliked the inadequate Common translations of the qunlat term, but still. *Not helping.*

Thankfully, Garrett accepted Arishok at face value. “I didn’t know your kind had a word for friend. No offence.”

Arishok huffed at Carver. “*This* is your brother? I heard tales of the Hawke in Kirkwall. I am not impressed.”

“Arishok said the same of the Grey Wardens,” Carver quickly defended to Garrett. “Arishok, I’ll meet you inside. What confuses you, Garrett?”

Arishok sent him a look before retreating back into the dreadnought, while Garrett slung an arm over Carver’s shoulders and cornered him in a headlock.

“You summoned Seekers here,” Garrett accused.

“...And a Right Hand of the Divine?” Carver weakly corrected.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything?” Garrett remarked. “I could have helped you with the *Circle* and *serial killers* and—”

“The Qunari?” Carver raised his brows.

Garrett grumbled, lowering his voice. “The things you keep from Mother and Bethany. The things you keep from *me*. Are they protecting us?”

Carver quieted. “I know I can’t fence the family from real trouble forever.” He met Garrett’s eyes squarely. “But there *is* trouble on the horizon, brother – the kind one can only mitigate, not prevent.”

Garrett’s eyes lit amber from sunlight bouncing off the waters. They seemed to pierce Carver’s soul, turning his ribs out like cupboard doors to see what he was made of. Weighing Carver’s heart in a spectral hand. Without meaning to, Carver held his breath.

“You learned of this,” Garrett slowly asked, “in your time in the Chantry?”

Carver blinked rapidly, having never joined its ranks. “You mean as a child?”

“You were always so serious about sword-fighting,” Garrett murmured. “You were...quiet for your age.”

Carver chuckled nervously. “A sociopath.”

Garrett didn't laugh. “Somehow, in our remote hometown, you deduced major events – and you still do, even now. Or should I credit a vision?”

Carver's heart leapt up his throat. “I can't tell if you're joking.”

Garrett stared at him, before suddenly sighing and shaking his head. “It has been a long day – just *one* day! Yet so much has happened.” He released Carver from his arm, noting Carver's satchel and bow. “You're not staying, are you.”

“I sail for Denerim today.”

Carver was only meant to ensure that Cassandra and Arishok would arrive at Kirkwall safely. He blinked when Garrett extended an arm, before clasping it.

“Don't spark chaos without me,” Garrett ordered.

Carver's lips twitched. “How can I? You bring it with you.”

The two brothers parted without looking back. After draining a pot of Par Vollen tea and decimating half a cookie tin with Arishok, Carver reluctantly also bade his friend farewell and headed for his ship leaving for Denerim. Carver sought to quietly, smoothly depart from Kirkwall without unnecessary attention, but he had one last task to fulfil. A detour to a cluster of Seekers on the docks earned him odd looks, especially when he asked for a Seeker Pharamond.

A grey-haired elven man with thick, bushy brows stepped away from the group to answer. Laugh lines and bulbous cheekbones highlighted a passive joy in the man that the Void itself wouldn't be able to rob him of.

“Seeker Pharamond,” Carver greeted. “I have a request as a friend of Wynne's.”

The elderly man lit up. “Ha! How is the old girl doing?”

“Flourishing in research, to my understanding,” Carver replied. “There's no long way about this, so forgive my frankness, but I've located her son and sent her my findings. She hasn't written back, but...concerning his safety....”

“Is he an apostate?” Pharamond gently prodded.

Carver coughed. “He’s a senior enchanter in the White Spire.”

Pharamond blinked.

“Rhys is attracted to good spirits, not demons,” Carver continued carefully. Pharamond didn’t know Carver was aware of the finer details in Seeker training. “I trust your judgement with him. At the very least, should the Templars of the White Spire establish a curfew while investigating inexplicable, possibly supernatural events, I pray someone would help Rhys see reason in observing the curfew. Harmless curiosity can entrap anyone in such circumstances.”

Pharamond pondered. “How did you know that Wynne’s friend Pharamond was a Seeker?”

Carver dithered.

“What was your name again?” Pharamond pressed.

“Ser Carver.”

They turned to see Cassandra walking towards them. Seekers and Templars saluted as she passed.

Cassandra stopped before them and raised a brow. “You two know each other?”

Carver sighed. “Leliana mentioned Seeker Pharamond before.”

The elderly man noted the name. “Hm! An old friend of mine evidently has other friends of her own. I hear your request, Ser Carver.”

Carver resisted slumping in relief. “Thank you, Seeker.” Pharamond returned to his group, granting Carver and Cassandra space. Carver turned. “What did you need?”

Cassandra gestured, and they strolled towards Carver’s ship. “I wished to express appreciation of your assistance in this matter. As they say, connections make the world turn.”

Carver blinked at the saying. “Do you have friends from Antiva?”

“How can I?” Cassandra replied with a twinkle in her eye. “My jurisdiction only extends to nations that host Circles.”

Carver's lips twitched. "Regardless, my usefulness ends here. I cannot speak for how Kirkwall's Circle will improve moving forward. If you would like insight, I recommend someone knowledgeable of Kirkwall's political landscape."

Cassandra hummed. "You remind me of her."

"Leliana?" Carver guessed.

"She said the same thing," Cassandra confirmed. "*You* were her recommendation."

"Leliana is too modest," Carver deflected.

"She said you'd say that."

"I unfortunately have my own matters to attend to."

"She *also* said you'd say that," Cassandra snorted, holding up an Orlesian steak knife. "In response, I am to show you this. I assume it's code, though I care not for the meaning. There is simply a mess to be cleaned. Are you with me, Ser Carver?"

A low blow. How else could Carver classify the reminder that he owed Leliana twice now, for retrieving Summer Sword for him when he needed it? Carver and Cassandra stopped before his ship, and he fixed his satchel.

"I don't have to be," Carver exhaled with amusement. "I have already prepared the resources you require to address Kirkwall's predicament. You may start with my sister, Bethany Hawke."

Cassandra's cheeks pinked, conscious of her brusque personality in the midst of a political situation. "Th-There is a manner in which I approach problems...!"

"I am aware of your manners, Seeker Cassandra. I am the one who recommended you for this mission." Carver inclined his head with a small smile, and moved for the gangway.

"Ser Carver!"

He glanced back, and Cassandra shifted in place. "...Do you serve the Chantry?"

Carver paused. "The Antivan Crows once functioned as a part of the Chantry. Now, they're just Antivan...and I am just Ferelden."

Nails grounded Carver to desk duty for three years.

Ah, but as a soldier, wouldn't Carver have to keep his skills honed? According to Nails, Carver could hone them in the training yard or in Denerim's streets. Unfortunately, the city limits were as far as Nails trusted him, and that was only due to the commander's confidence he could throw Carver that far. To Carver's credit, he had helped ship Rendon Howe to Denerim, where the courts had executed the former arl under witness of the Couslands and Nathaniel. The combat quality of Shielders shot up under Carver's guidance.

Whenever Carver chafed against his punishment, Nails would threaten to convince the Crown to grant Carver a title and all the responsibilities of a teyrn of Gwaren. Considering Carver kept his family relations to himself – and *knew* Maric's Shield would laugh at him if they ever learned of his viscount brother – the threat proved effective. Carver forced himself to be content with learning of world-shaking news from his desk and through his network.

One *would* think that Garrett sitting in the Viscount's Keep at a time of Seeker supervision and Qunari negotiations was a recipe for disaster. It seemed all of southern Thedas stirred at news of a mage ruler. Though Orlais discredited the depth of the scandal by highlighting that Kirkwall was merely one of several city-states in the Free Marches, the controversial figure that was Inquisitor Ameridan encouraged the University of Orlais to reflect. Orlais' founding emperor had counted an elven *mage* as one of his closest friends. Only the fact that Ameridan had been a faithful Andrastian made the facts palatable for Orlesian nobility; indeed, the baseless idea spread that magic outside of a Circle had been acceptable *for the times* from someone of *nomadic Dalish origins*. Viscount Hawke wasn't Dalish and didn't seem to share his friend Prince Vael's piety.

The facts didn't prevent a portion of the general public from praising Garrett as a viscount, especially in Kirkwall. Few others could claim having been able to single-handedly stop a Qunari invasion, however unsanctioned. Qunari were even peacefully cooperating with Garrett's office on removing a dreadnought from Kirkwall's waters and leaving to never speak of the matter again. In a way, having Garrett for a ruler felt more secure than the average noble — even if he sometimes ditched his seneschal to play with his dog, knock back drinks in the Hanged Man, or kill a high dragon nested in the Bone Pit.

Even Templars in Kirkwall respected Garrett for his contribution to public order, and unlike Meredith, the Seekers ignored Kirkwall's officials who were too happy to ignore them in return. No one could question Aveline's dedication to Kirkwall's safety, and Chantry figures weren't supposed to interfere in matters of the City Guard anyway.

Carver knew Cassandra already had enough on her plate on a covert mission with Pharamond from the Divine. While Seekers addressed the horrors secretly conducted in Kirkwall's Circle, Cassandra and Pharamond relocated its Tranquils to Therinfal Redoubt, where the mages were given the choice to endure the tough training to become a Seeker. To maintain secrecy regarding Tranquility's origins, the public excuse was that several Kirkwall Templars like Knight-Lieutenant Otto Alrik had been found to be abusing Tranquils and the Rite of Tranquility. Transferring the Tranquils to another Circle couldn't serve as an answer, hence their relocation to Therinfal Redoubt.

Indeed, Garrett performed passably well as a viscount, despite rumour of his inner circle either tearing their hair out in stress — Aveline — congratulating him from Starkhaven — Sebastian — or laughing at him — everyone else.

No, the true gremlin had to be *Bethany*.

Bethany who, within a year of becoming a first enchanter, decided to reveal *the Fraternity of Illuminati*.

Originally a rumoured secret society prominently in the Free Marches, the Illuminati presented a research-focused community that respected religious beliefs and opposed abuse of power, particularly acts that inhibited one's ability to share knowledge. Dalish composed an unexpected amount of the fraternity, from Clan Siona near the Brecilian Forest to Clan Sabrae in Sundermount.

The Dalish wouldn't have joined had the Frostback Basin expedition not created a flow of information about Avvar reaching into the Free Marches. In Avvar culture, augur apprentices willingly hosted spirits to guide their growth with kindness and patience, before releasing the spirits upon their maturity as an augur. Bethany had evidently learned of this and persuaded Clan Sabrae to tolerate Merrill's contact with Audacity, an ostensible pride demon. Bethany had also convinced Maretheri to research more about the Avvar's ways to ensure Merrill and the clan's safety.

Clan Sabrae had ended up becoming the first Dalish clan to join,

inspiring other clans when word had spread. In effect, Avvar tribes like the Stonebears in Frostback Basin could loosely be considered members of the Illuminati. Carver groaned into his hands upon realising that not only Anders, but Merrill had been in the Illuminati when he had been in Kirkwall.

Now that they were revealed to the world, Bethany emphasised the Illuminati's peaceful community as proof that Fade-touched people could responsibly live and work together while coexisting with non-mages. The Illuminati also proved that its ideals crossed boundaries, allowing harmony between people of different beliefs.

Upon the Illuminati's publicization, Rhys in Orlais shifted from being a Libertarian to an Illuminatus. As a senior enchanter of the White Spire – the heart of a Chantry-ruled Circle – Rhys' decision solidified the Illuminati's status as a fraternity. When the College of Enchanters hosted a conclave in Cumberland to elect a new Grand Enchanter, Rhys and other enchanters followed Bethany to the influential port city in Nevarra, where they were allowed entry.

The Sun Dome in Cumberland became a melting pot. Aside from Rhys, Merrill drew attention as an attendee. No one could oppose her presence as a representative of Dalish Illuminati, and the College eventually agreed that a clan's Keeper was similar to a first enchanter. Given Marethari's greater interest in protecting and preserving her clan, Merrill as a former First and the more avid researcher stepped up.

On the Aequitarians' side, there were only two representatives of note. One was a grizzly, weary old man named Edmonde, the First Enchanter of the White Spire. He was the de facto leader of his fraternity due to him having the longest enchanter career; a feat in itself, given the large and outspoken fraternity. United by the common idea that mages should operate within the more reasonable tenets of Chantry law — and outside the rest, if ethically called to — it seemed everyone wanted a hand on the reins. The fact they could agree on Edmonde was a miracle.

Presiding over the fraternity added to Edmonde's years, leaving him with energy for little else. It was purportedly still awkward when he recognised one of his senior enchanters sitting across the dome with a young and controversial fraternity. Rhys barely noticed due to the other Aequitarian of note: First Enchanter Wynne of Kinloch Hold, having returned from Tevinter to address the meeting and certain familial matters. Carver understood that Wynne had left Shale with



Feynriel in Tevinter.

The Libertarians occupied a fifth of the Sun Dome as they always did, eager to further an autonomous Circle. First Enchanter Fiona led the fraternity, championed by the members as a reliably neutral voice given her former Warden background. A senior enchanter of the White Spire named Jeannot assisted Fiona. In equal attendance were Loyalists, represented by Senior Enchanter Irving of Kinloch Hold and other such enchanters who didn't live by the book, but *were* the book. Both fraternities were still dwarfed in number by the Aequitarians. In comparison, the Fraternity of Isolationists sent one token representative. Carver was surprised they bothered sending anyone, as it was unlikely that the next Grand Enchanter would be Isolationist-friendly or -minded.

Finally, there were the Lucrosians, who sent their wealthiest and most politically influential members to – apparently – engage in passive-aggressive arguments with the Aequitarians over the number of ballot boxes in the Dome and the arrangement of voting cards. The position of Grand Enchanter held the highest authority in the world of Circle mages, serving as their representative to the Chantry and their chief adviser on all matters magical. The Lucrosians and Aequitarians' nitpicking mattered little, however, when Fiona ended up elected as the next Grand Enchanter.

Fiona's first act was to motion for a vote of secession from the Chantry.

The Sun Dome nearly burst into literal flames, before Wynne led the vote against it. However, due to the very act of voting about independence, the Chantry temporarily revoked all fraternities' rights to meet. While the action prevented another heated assembly in the Sun Dome, it also expressed the Chantry's willingness to dissolve the College of Enchanters, and with it mages' rights to self-expression.

The conclave's details frayed Carver's sanity, but he understood that the Illuminati ultimately left Cumberland the true winner. Bethany's fraternity was officially recognised by other fraternities, and thus the Chantry itself. She made use of changes in Kirkwall's Circle to be able to contact family members regardless of their last name, and reassure Carver that she was moving cautiously. Per Carver's request, Bethany had her fraternity scout a Clan Lavellan near Wycome, but the clan — like the people of Wycome — declined involvement in institutional politics, preferring their isolation.

Carver's focus in mage matters cost him details of Meredith's sword. Between departing from Kirkwall and crashing into the coasts of Brandel's Reach, the sword's box and its Seeker guards had vanished, likely taken by the storm that had violently thrown the ship off-course and hundreds of kilometres east from the intended port of Amaranthine. When Carver reached out to his Antivan contacts, he was firmly advised against poking into Brandel's Reach. As an island that raiders called home, no ship flying legal colours could dare sail close to its ports without risking attention from the sea of raider ships anchored there.

There was also a possibility that the Carta, driven by Bartrand's brief prosperity and not his loss of a guild seat, had organised a hijacking of the Seekers' ship in hopes of attaining the sword and the red lyrium idol attached to it. Alternatively, the Carta had sought to erase any chance of their rivals possibly acquiring the valuable artefact. Either way, the sword was lost to Carver. Infuriated, the Seekers pulled out of Kirkwall's Circle to investigate any whispers of red lyrium.

In the months after Carver's probation expired, he hunted Ferelden's coasts for information on the Carta, to no avail. Then Oren Cousland turned the legal age of eighteen to Amethyne Kendells' twenty-one, and Carver was invited to their wedding.

## Chapter End Notes

Viscount Garrett is funny, because he blew up the roof in his new office :D

For tracking purposes, Carver left Kirkwall in early 9:35.

# Fine

## Chapter Notes

Getting this chapter in earlier than expected! I got inspired ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Arl Urien Kendells spared no expense on the occasion, from the catering, to the decor, to the fifty or so minstrels composing the equivalent of a chamber orchestra. The Kendells manor cleared out its courtyard for the wedding to present a sweetheart table presiding over banquet tables nearly spilling with food. A wide, square dais was temporarily set up behind them to host quadrilles, drawing eyes to the last third of the courtyard closest to the manor's central structure. There, a path of roses led to an arbor painted in Kendells seafoam green and wreathed with the grapevines of the Cousland heraldry.

Deep blue and pastel green drapes zig-zagged overhead to offer strips of shade, gently stirring when a breeze blew in a whiff of the ocean. The Maker Himself seemed to be watching over the wedding, for the weather was so clean and cheerful as to inspire wide smiles between the Couslands and Kendells. Even Carver briefly forgot that he was attending out of obligation. He otherwise couldn't have been stuffed into the red and gold finery of a Shielder. That was not without declining Anora's willingness to fashion him alternate finery, in reflection of his private relations across the Waking Sea.

Maker's breath, it was someone's *wedding*. Carver refused to become a magnet for attention.

Oren and Amethyne, in comparison, gracefully received their guests' flattery and the well wishes of the queen in attendance, for the king was in the royal palace watching over the young prince. Growing up with a fiancé and a fiancée in the world of court, Oren and Amethyne had evidently developed a friendship, and in time a relationship with each other, going by their twin grins and giggling. They were as pups in love.

Constantly around the couple were Oren's parents, Amethyne's grandfather, and Kallian Harthon. Carver understood that due to the Wardens' neutrality, Elissa had dutifully declined her wedding invitation, but had still written to her brother's family. In a letter to Carver, Elissa had also revealed that Connor Guerrin apparently

maintained contact with Alistair from Ferelden's Circle, thanks to Wynne's leadership. Upon news of Isolde's birth to a daughter a few years after the blight, Connor had remembered the kindness shown to him as a child by two men with Templar abilities, and reached out to Alistair. Out of his promise to Carver, Alistair didn't speak of Carver in great detail to Connor, since much of the captain was a secret. Instead, over time, Alistair and Connor's closeness began to resemble that of a father and son, spurring Elissa to help conceal the correspondence from other wardens.

Elissa was gracefully happy for her brother and sister-in-law when they had Brice Cousland, named in honour of Bryce who, along with his wife, had died protecting the family from Rendon Howe and the Howe legion. Now seven years old, Brice's chatty attendance of the wedding showed that the strong-willed, patriotic blood of Couslands ran hotly in him – along with the passionate blood of his Antivan mother. Dragged around the courtyard by Brice was his fiancé since birth, Eirian Howe born a year ahead of him. A delicate young man, Eirian grew up at the knee of the sensible and politically-savvy Nathaniel Howe, who had managed to raise Amaranthine up after Rendon and his legion's treason against a great name. Coddled by his parents who would be equally happy in a commoner's life, Eirian was humble despite his origins.

Per Ferelden custom, Oren was to become arl regent under Amethyne upon her succession, since Urien Kendells's old age meant he was likely to retire sooner than Fergus Cousland. Given Nathaniel was younger than Fergus, Eirian would grow up to become teyrn regent under Brice. The tradition was why the Kendells could host Oren and Amethyne's wedding, and why the Couslands could invite the Howes in the name of peace.

Carver noted the absence of Eirian's parents from the wedding, who were occupied in Vigil's Keep with another child on the way. Nathaniel alone was present as Eirian's guardian with the help of his maternal uncle Leonas Bryland, the arl of South Reach. Though initially wary of Rendon's blood, Leonas now doted on his sister's children given their close resemblance of her in character and looks. Leonas honoured Nathaniel's decision to bring him to the wedding as a plus one, despite his daughter's pleas to let her tag along as a guest's guest. Habren Bryland was rumoured to buy one puppy a month from Denerim's markets; evidence towards a spoiled child. Around Nathaniel's calm rationality, Leonas was starting to put his foot down with his daughter.

The thought of Habren Bryland evoked a snort from Carver, which he hastily hid behind a cough. After the blight, Carver had recruited a certain Daveth into the king's army. The pickpocket had fought off darkspawn from Fort Drakon, risking his life to protect the citizens, and had afterwards stayed in Denerim to help with the reconstruction. Daveth had seen the blight and its collateral damage as an issue for everyone, regardless of social or economic standing. He *had* given Carver a hard time arresting him for suspected thievery against the South Reach arl's spendthrift daughter, but the chase had reminded Carver why he saw Daveth as a good fit for Maric's Shield, should Daveth rise to it. Carver kept his plans to himself in the meantime while he trained Daveth in the king's army.

Anora quietly stood next to Carver on the sidelines of the venue. "I see the weather has encouraged even you to smile."

Carver shed his musings. "Your Majesty."

"Don't sober up on my account," Anora commented. "We wouldn't be here at a wedding if not for you. Unless you find amusement elsewhere."

Carver dryly hummed. "You've been bullying the Chantry."

"Speaking facts," Anora demurred. "The Canticle of Shartan was originally part of the Chant. Ambassador Briala also stated so."

Anora had recited a verse in the anniversary of Adahlan's founding, while Briala had delivered a speech – nearly a sermon – about the elven uprising beneath a Chantry mural of Shartan, Andraste, and her disciples. Where Shartan's pointed ears had been docked in the original mural, they were faithfully elven in a reproduction at the University of Orlais. Briala had highlighted this during her speech, piously quoting Shartan and Andraste that they were all the Maker's children.

In response, the Chantry upheld Briala as an example of a devout Andrastian while the institution considered the mural's restoration. In reality, the Divine was sick of hearing Orlais' political issues. Like a mother with countless children, Divine Justinia hadn't slept since taking the sunburst throne. She didn't have time to address Orlais' problems with mounting pressure regarding mages all across southern Thedas, but she couldn't escape the fact that the Chantry was headquartered in Orlais. Justinia and Celene exchanged sharp words the few times they wrote to each other.

Anora and Carver straightened when Grand Cleric Elemena strode in. Everyone quickly stepped out of the woman's way and headed towards the arbor. Carver and other knighted attendees lined the rose path and drew their swords above them to create an archway of shining blades, inspiring a ripple of muted gasps at the sight of Vigilance and Summer Sword.

Finally, Amethyne strolled down the rosy path for the arbor, where the grand cleric and Oren stood waiting. The knighted attendees sheathed their swords and turned to the front, before the grand cleric united Oren and Amethyne before the eyes of the Maker. Elemena bestowed a kiss of peace upon Oren's forehead, who turned and placed a kiss on Amethyne's lips. The minstrels' music swelled with the declaration that Oren and Amethyne Kendells were wed.

Carver exhaled deeply. One wedding down....

As everyone gaily moved for the dance floor and the banquet tables, the young children in attendance wove between the adults' legs in excitement, now free to run off and play. While the adults were distracted, Carver caught sight of several children huddled around Eirian, before one of them pushed him to the ground and jeered at his frailty.

Brice flew in and grabbed the bully's collar to shove him against a wall.

The children erupted into a brawl.

"Andraste's flaming t—!"

Carver exasperatedly waded through infantile punches and kicks to snatch Brice by the collar, separating him from the bully. Guests, guards, and the wedded couple turned to peer at the commotion in bewilderment while the nearest adults hastily intervened. An adult grabbed the bully by his doublet and wrenched him away from Brice and Eirian, kicking and screaming. The other children's parents caught up, spurring the little ones to hurriedly vanish into the crowd before they could be punished. Upon sight of Fergus and Oriana, Carver held Brice by the shoulders and turned him towards his parents, but the tyke vainly wrestled from his grip to swing at the bully.

"He started it!" Brice yelled.

Like a feedback loop, the bully mirrored the accusation, inciting a shouting match at knee-height.

Nathaniel brushed grass off of Eirian and helped him stand up. “Now, lad,” Nathaniel addressed Brice, “let us not lose ourselves to a frenzy, hm? You won’t be breaking out of the grip of Summer Sword’s wielder anytime soon.”

Brice and the bully quieted into snuffles, red-faced but curious. Brice twisted in Carver’s hands to peer over his shoulder at the sheathed golden sword. Fergus replaced Carver’s hold on Brice with a grateful look as the bully’s parents came to claim their son. While the guardians and children sorted out the mess and everyone else returned to celebrating the wedding, a Kendells soldier that had been guarding the venue rushed to Carver’s side.

“Ser Carver,” the soldier spoke. “A soldier of the king’s army is at the gates. They said you wished to be apprised of Circle matters.”

Carver stepped aside. “What happened?”

“A meeting of sorts,” the Kendells soldier shook his head, stunned. “It ended poorly. A mage-Templar war has begun.”

X

The Divine’s research into Tranquility had finally crystallised into a desire for institutional change. To reform Circle policy, the Divine invited the College of Enchanters to convene not in Cumberland, but the White Spire to discuss reformation between themselves, and with only first enchanters allowed to attend. Lower-ranked enchanters were allowed to come based on the depth of their possible contribution to the discussion. Lord Seeker Lambert conceded to let the College meet on the condition that they be restricted to their quarters in the White Spire when the conclave was not in session. In this solemn state, a handful of enchanters convened to discuss reform.

Edmonde and Wynne were among the Aequitarians. Irving, among the Loyalists. Bethany and Rhys represented the Illuminati, while the Isolationists sent no one and the Lucrosians likewise saw no profit in attending, knowing they would prosper regardless of Chantry or Circle law. Finally, Fiona led the conclave as the Grand Enchanter and a representative of Libertarians, supported by Jeannot and a senior enchanter of the White Spire named Adrian.

The last two were secretly Resolutionists, and they hadn’t come alone.

During the conclave, Fiona derailed the discussion into the topic of seceding from Chantry rule, sparking friction in the small crowd.

When no one could agree on even the act of voting, the Resolutionists passionately revealed themselves, bringing up rumours that there was a way to reverse Tranquility. Naturally, given the number of Tranquil that had moved from Kirkwall to Therinfal Redoubt and become Seekers, it grew harder to contain the secret of Tranquility's origins. Lord Seeker Lambert was aware of Cassandra and Pharamond's research, but didn't know how the rumours could have spread, so he tried to quell the Resolutionists' cries with vague logic – then demands.

One didn't reason with terrorists.

The Resolutionists responded with violence, splitting the room between those who would defend Seekers, and those who would defend mages – even passionately confused ones, in the eyes of Fiona and other mages who had known the Resolutionists as friends. Then there were those who were merely bewildered and found themselves locked in a chamber where one either fought or met their peril. The conclave disintegrated into a slaughter where no one left unharmed. Blood ran in the White Spire that day, and like a chain explosion, Circles around southern Thedas began to fall apart.

Not a year later, the Chantry learned that Dairsmuid's Circle in Rivaini had been perpetuating hedge magic since the Circle's establishment, and had been training seers who sometimes allowed themselves to be possessed like Avvar augur apprentices. The Right of Annulment was delivered on Dairsmuid's Circle in response. With uncertainty spread as far north as Rivain, Bethany, the Illuminati, and fleeing mages relocated to the Château Haine under Garrett's name for their safety.

It was a full-blown Mage-Templar War.

Carver found himself busier with his actual job than his extra-curricular work. Apostates and Templar hunters were running in and out of Ferelden, public hysteria was on the rise, and thus so was banditry. The king's army barely had the manpower to maintain order, which was how Nails ended up rotating Carver and other Shielders out in highway patrols. Everyone was working overtime. Given Orlais was host to the Chantry's heart, the western country was suffering the most from the conflict. Carver didn't want to imagine Celene's stress on top of balancing elven uprisings with Briala and handling pro-annexation nobles like Gaspard. The duke was taking advantage of Celene's distraction to quicken his plans for the throne.

Because *that* was what southern Thedas needed: a civil war in its



largest, most powerful country that was the reason why Tevinter hadn't invaded the south since the Schism's provocations. The controversy regarding the "true" Chantry still fiercely divided Tevinter and southern Thedas even now. Carver would rather take a blight.

He immediately knocked on his wooden desk, just as Nails swung his door open.

"What's that for?" Nails raised a brow.

Carver glowered at the stack of papers Nails dropped on his desk. "I was just imagining your head— already leaving?"

Nails briskly walked out of his office with a toss of his hand. "I haven't slept in three days!"

Carver slumped in his chair as he considered his growing paperwork. First the king's army, then Maric's Shield, and now "Cauthrien's Secretaries." The army loved its divisions, but not as much as Nails and Carver did. They were only able to handle their workload due to the efficient support of the secretary department. Which Carver promptly decided to do, with the thinnest trail of whispers mentioning red lyrium in the Brecilian Forest. He acknowledged the possibility he was merely hearing words from ignorant eyes seeing "shady elves" and hearing common or volatile words like "red" and "lyrium." Still, after what felt like aeons of silence, Carver had to pounce on mere whispers before they could vanish – even if it meant combing the mystical forest.

With a reshuffle of documents to Cauthrien's Secretaries, Carver packed up and headed south past Dragon's Peak, then east for forested coast. While the dizzying forest at first turned Carver around twice despite his tracking the sun's angle, he eventually found himself trekking ground with less underbrush. Massive tree roots twisted in a net of wood and moss made slippery from recent rain. At times, Carver could actually see where he was stepping. Then he realised that the past few trees he had been leaning on for stability were sporting faint notches.

Like the markings of a trail.

Nearby shrubs rustled, and Carver whipped his head around just in time to catch sight of a flying club.

When he came to, his head was throbbing and his hands were tied above his head. The light was dim, but Carver recognised he was in

elven ruins, possibly an underground level based on the smell and humidity. He was bound by rope to a hook in the ceiling of a cramped stone room, likely a fixture meant for a hanging brazier. Cracks in the ceiling suggested that the room above suffered from invasive tree roots, allowing sunlight to stream through collapsed walls down into Carver's ceiling. He was dehydrated. He had been unconscious for hours, and he was currently stripped to his underwear with none of his gear or possessions in sight.

The door to Carver's room eased open, then closed, allowing an elf with a cloth bag over their head in like an executioner's hood. The elf cracked their wrapped knuckles and punched up Carver's exposed ribs, startling a pained cry from him. Rope around his ankles twisted, drawing his eyes to his bound feet. He couldn't feel them.

*Thwack.* Another blow.

Carver gasped, wincing. "Why are you doing this?"

The elf didn't answer for the next dozen blows. Finally, the stranger retreated, picked up a bowl that had been out of Carver's sight, and poured water into his mouth. The stranger set it back down before Carver could finish a tenth of it, and left the room.

The pattern repeated for days until Carver finished the water. Then the questions came – about what brought Carver to the forest, how he knew to follow the trail, how he thought to even look for something like red lyrium. Over the course of Carver's ingrained non-answers, a horrific realisation slowly dawned on him. He didn't receive confirmation of the idea until one day, a different elf entered his room.

The man was tall, easily reaching Carver's height, and lithe like a hunter, moving silently in plain robes with a straight, even posture. He wore no hood, drawing attention to his wide, sloping shoulders and clean-shaven head. He tilted a narrow chin and grey-purple eyes at Carver.

"You know who I am."

Carver's dry throat choked out a breath. "The black hood...has green eyes."

Elves were hazel-eyed on a scale from green to grey-green, sometimes nearly black, marking their close ancestry with the Fade in mixed colours.

Ancient elves were on a scale of purples.

A hum answered Carver's response. "Few analyse history's echoes without bias, and find truth."

Carver inwardly cursed. The rumours of "shady elves" he had chased on a whim were about agents for the bloody *Dread Wolf*. Who else would also seek the red lyrium idol, if not the one who seemed to know the most about it? Carver decided to label the man in front of him as "Solas," even if he would end up sorely corrected.

Solas lit a spirit blade down his hand.

Carver's breath quickened. "I didn't hear a question—"

A gesture, and Carver found himself severed from the ceiling, collapsing forward into his captor with freed hands. Pins and needles ran down Carver's entire body, seizing him in paralysing agony. He barely noticed Solas holding him up by the back of his smallclothes' waistband, before dropping Carver backwards into a wooden chair. Carver grit his teeth and tensed in an unnatural position, wracked by the pain of his blood flowing. The sound of rushing water filled his ears.

Solas dragged over another chair that had been out of Carver's sight and sat across him. "Are you thirsty?"

Fear jolted down Carver's spine. Was the question an invitation to summon the other elf back and resume Carver's torture?

"I'm fine," Carver decided.

His company sighed, triggering a complicated sense of guilt like Carver had disappointed Solas. Carver could see that accepting water was ultimately rational for the sake of extending one's life, but he hadn't felt rational since a week ago.

"You know much," Solas commented.

Carver coughed. "You want to know how much?"

"I ask the questions here."

The pain began to subside, allowing exhaustion to slam down on Carver like a hammer. He slumped in his chair, fuelled only by sugar water. Solas reached into his robes and produced a familiar journal

with a lock. Carver had maintained the leather journal from the moment he had acquired it in Lothering as a child, filling its pages with his knowledge of a certain video game in a script only he understood. He referenced his journal for when he couldn't recall details, especially when time stretched and they began to blur in his memory. Carver wouldn't have been able to accomplish everything he had during the blight or in Kirkwall if he hadn't had his records.

The lock on Carver's journal required a key he kept in his coin purse, but he knew it wasn't foolproof. When Carver had reunited with Bethany in Kirkwall, he had requested for his sister to protect his journal from decay and prying eyes to the best of her magical ability. Only aware that the journal was Carver's diary, Bethany had teasingly obliged. With someone else's inspiration, Bethany secured the journal behind a secure phrase and a handprint upon its cover. Now, it seemed, Bethany's skills as the founder of the Illuminati were about to be tested.

Carver flicked his gaze up from the journal, only to realise that Solas had been watching him. Fear triggered Carver's eyes to suddenly wet with surprise, and he swallowed a rush of saliva.

"Even a scholar must preserve his musings somewhere," Solas commented.

It wasn't a question, but something in Carver's body language must have betrayed him, since Solas set the journal down in his lap.

"What is the verbal code to this book?"

The honest question shocked a laugh out of Carver, already accepting that Solas had deduced the journal's security. "Are you seriously *asking* me for my password?"

Solas lifted his chin. "I *could* separate your soul from your body and break down your memories in the Fade, like one would topple a tower to count its bricks. However, I prefer the faster and less messy route of giving you the opportunity to present a friend in yourself."

Carver cleared his throat, bewildered. "I doubt we could ever be friends. And why would I? You present me two paths: one where you peep into all of my memories like a pervert, and you read my diary — or one where I give you my password, and you read my diary. You want to be civil? Offer *me* something in exchange for my privacy."

Solas tensed. "A bullheaded human as you would gain little from

accessing my personal thoughts.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Carver countered. “Two questions. You must answer one, then I share my handprint. Answer my other question, and I will tell you my password. Sound fair?”

Solas’s brows furrowed, and a stretch of silence preceded his response. “I am disinclined from enlightening others when they draft themselves the losing end of a bargain. You, however, I suspect have enough intelligence to be aware of this much.”

It was true that in exchange for Carver’s personal journal, Solas wasn’t being asked to surrender the equivalent of his own. Two answers were only as good as the two questions advancing them. The burden was on the inquirer.

Carver’s mind slowly caught up with Solas’s meaning. “You think I’m somehow going to cheat you. This is madness. You...the immortal trickster...are *afraid* of making a deal with me.”

“Wary,” Solas sternly corrected.

“Of a bullheaded human,” Carver tossed back. Perhaps it was the incredulity of moment, or of the greater setting, that choked Carver’s throat with the briefest and most silent of giggles. When they passed, he shakily pressed his fingers over his closed eyes and exhaled. “I am aware this deal sounds unfair for me, but you must consider. Perhaps the answers to my two questions are as valuable to me, as the contents of my diary are to you.”

Solas’s lips thinned, unsatisfied. He surprised Carver by not pushing. Maybe Solas imagined that Carver thought his diary was not so insightful as to matter to an elven god.

In characteristic evasion, Solas returned, “I’ll be the judge of that. Your second question?”

Carver’s eyes shot open, and he gaped at Solas. “I haven’t asked my first!”

“You asked me if this deal sounded fair,” Solas evenly reminded. “I answered.”

“*Maker’s breath...*” Carver muttered. “Fine. Though I have to say you aren’t making any friends here.”

Solas held his palm up unabashedly.

Carver sighed and placed his hand flat on Solas's. A faint shimmering like light off rippling water ran around their hands. Carver didn't know how much time the spell required, so he resolved himself to sit there for a while as if he had the energy to do otherwise. Solas watched him expectantly.

After a beat of gathering courage, Carver straightened and peered into purple depths. "How does Urthemiël refer to you?"

Solas stiffened, ambushed. Combined with Carver staring into his eyes, Solas's fluster was perceivable. His loss of words was genuine. "I'm — I don't — I have never personally spoken with the one widely known as Urthemiël. The answer you seek — I simply don't have."

"A shame," Carver began, but Solas broke their eye contact and cut Carver off with a trembling voice.

"You deceived me."

The god was *furious*.

"Not my intention," Carver quickly defended. "Well, not fully. I'm not so cruel as to dishonour the spirit of our bargain. You merely owe me an answer."

Solas was vibrating with emotion. "I can hardly locate and communicate with Urthemiël this instant."

"Then don't," Carver bluntly stated. "Whether you have to embark on a long journey or not to find an answer, I don't care. Unless you regrettably perish in such a journey. I might celebrate a little. Fact of the matter is, I am owed an answer before such a time as I perish."

Solas's glower eased, though a subtle shadow caught the short scar between his brows. "You are delaying your death."

Carver shrugged. "Not how I'd phrase it. More like setting terms."

"You *expect* to die by my hand," Solas continued, crossing gazes. Suddenly, even up close, the deified trickster's expression was stony and unreadable. The heat that had possessed the air around him abruptly vanished as if he and Carver had suddenly dived into ice water. "You...."

“I believe I’m asking the questions here,” Carver hesitantly reminded.

Solas blinked. For a moment, Carver could believe that the elf had forgotten what era and world he was in — so unfocused and ancient was his gaze — before Solas returned to earth and dropped Carver’s hand from his grip.

Solas’s face had shut down. When he spoke, his voice was low and flat. “An answer, you shall receive.” He paused. “You are a soul confined to another’s body, now treading a new life. When did you live your first?”

Carver twitched. “If you touch Carver, I’ll kill you, Dread Wolf or not.”

Solas stood up, slipping the journal back into his robes. He stepped out of the room. “We’re done here.”

The hooded stranger returned, and before Carver could breathe another syllable, the man knocked him out.

When Carver eventually came to, he was face-up in the Brecilian Passage with all of his belongings except his key and journal.

## Chapter End Notes

Not going to lie, I’ve been looking forward to Solas’ appearance. His and Carver’s scene was one of the first scenes I wrote before committing to a full-fledged fanfiction. OG!Carver and SE! Carver’s scene was another one.

Thank you everyone for your support. You guys keep me going!

# Assistance

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Leliana rubbed her temples, persuading a headache to fade away.

Justinia had declared her intentions to host a divine conclave, calling all enchanters and high-ranked Templars to convene with her and Chantry authorities to search for a solution to the war. The conflict was hurting southern Thedas and piercing the fault lines in the land's institutions. After a Resolutionist's assassination attempt of the Divine in the Grand Cathedral, the conclave's venue was changed from a Chantry to the neutral grounds of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Unable to ask for support from the knights-divine without risking political backlash, Leliana and Cassandra had to organise the Divine and the temple's security themselves. The task was only one of many hurdles. Thankfully, Cullen's retirement from the Order and enlistment into the Divine's provisional forces helped ease Leliana's concerns in the security's professionalism.

At a glimpse of deep blue outside Leliana's window, a soothing warmth bloomed in her chest. Here now arrived another balm to her worries.

Leliana stepped out of the stone building she had appropriated for an office while she was to remain in Haven. The small village had become an administrative site for Chantry officials who were working in the weeds to have the conclave run smoothly, like Leliana, Cassandra, Cullen, and Leliana's friend Josephine. The contract diplomatic advisor was exceedingly helpful in pacifying attitudes and moving things along. Every day, another local from around the area could be found helping tidy Haven for the arrival of the Divine and all her guests. Cassandra and Cullen meanwhile focused their resources on clearing the path to the restored Temple of Sacred Ashes and recruiting guards for the venue.

"Leli!" a distant figure called out.

Leliana's face split in a grin, and she dashed through a pile of snow. "Solo!"

Braided white hair swung as Leliana hoisted her beloved into the air



with a twirl before pulling her into an embrace. A faint perfume of herbs tickled Leliana's nose as she sighed into Solona's ear. The warden squirmed, ticklish. They parted with cheeks pink from the cold and a shared warmth, yet their admiration of each other lasted only briefly before they were locking lips. The couple kissed with the effort of rooting out the time that they had been apart, savouring the realness of them together.

When they finally truly parted, Leliana sighed. "I love you."

"I love *you*," Solona returned with a twinkle in her eye.

The two of them hooked their arms together and began strolling through Haven's outskirts, where the clamour of busybodies almost faded away. Leliana and Solona made a game of who could crunch the most leaves and pine straw under their feet. With her snow white hair and deep blue warden garb, Solona resembled a snow princess floating through her domain. Her presence in Haven seemed to bring with her the sun as she smiled. Leliana and Solona had worked hard to restore Solona's ability to express happiness again.

"I'm glad Soldier's Peak sent you as their messenger," Leliana confessed.

"Oh, let's not talk about work, my love." Solona leaned her head on Leliana's shoulder. "Once I complete my task as a courier, I must leave."

"Not return?" Leliana verified.

"It's time," Solona confirmed. "The First Warden called for me and Avernus. I'll be one of the few wardens from Soldier's Peak to have seen the Anderfels."

"Indeed," Leliana pressed a kiss on the top of Solona's head, "let me regale you with stories of the nugs I've been raising in Val Royeaux."

They circled Haven until dusk fell, before retreating to Haven's tavern for dinner. Leliana nodded to Flissa as they settled in a corner closest to the fireplace. The couple basked in each other's company while slowly working through their meal. By the end of it, they clasped hands and leaned into each other to watch the flames.

Leliana murmured. "How does Elissa plan to attend the conclave?"

Solona chuckled. "Carver convinced her not to come."

“What?” Leliana turned in her seat to look at her lover, voice dropping. “Where is he.”

“He lives up to his nickname — you know the one, from Ostagar? — using his friends as messengers.” Solona amusedly revealed three envelopes one at a time. “Warden-Commander Duncan again reminds Divine Justinia that the Grey Wardens are duty-bound to political neutrality in times of both peace and war. Recruitment processes are likewise independent of political and religious beliefs.”

Meaning anyone was allowed into the Wardens, permitted they survived a Joining. Whether or not recent recruits included former Circle mages or Templars was moot.

Solona continued. “Elissa writes to you her explanation for why she has declined the Divine’s invitation for the conclave. This last one is from Carver.”

Leliana accepted an envelope no wider than the palm of her hand. “It’s light.”

Solona propped her chin up on the table to watch Leliana. The firelight danced on Solona’s profile, making her bronze skin almost glow. Leliana felt an irresistible urge to fix a stray hair behind Solona’s ear and feel the woman’s warmth through her fingertips. “You know him: a person of few words.”

“Then the Grey Wardens are bowing out from the conclave,” Leliana guessed.

“We never vowed to come.” Solona tucked Leliana’s small braid behind her ear, then pressed her palm into Leliana’s cheek. “Besides, it’s only Soldier’s Peak. I understand our Orlesian counterpart might attend.”

Solona’s hand moved to the back of Leliana’s neck, and they leaned into each other with pressed foreheads. To be one’s love was to share in vulnerability. Though they had difficult pasts, they had found peace in each other.

Solona whispered. “*I want you.*”

Leliana’s heart skipped a beat, before she brushed her knuckles up Solona’s chest and pushed her braid over her shoulder. “*Je suis fou de toi.*”

That night, they embraced so as to imprint themselves in each other's body and soul, lighting their minds with the ecstasy and release of a shared wholeness. The renewed passion and joy carried Leliana through their final parting and the days it took for Carver to answer Leliana's letter. When the dark-haired soldier stepped through Haven's gates, a pang of longing went through Leliana's chest at his electric blue eyes. They weren't the more subdued steel that Solona possessed, but so soon after her departure, Leliana found herself moved by reminders of the woman.

In the time Leliana hadn't seen Carver, he had finally seen fit to wear the white armour of a Shielder without trying to conceal it. Lined with gold and emblazoned with the Theirin crest, there was no hiding the armour's function, and the deep red cloak over Carver's shoulders completed the colours of the Theirin heraldry. The faint iridescence in the golden helmet hanging from the side of his belt identified it as the dragonscale helmet Master Wade had smithed as part of a set more than a decade ago, split between the former members of Carver's party. Leliana invited Carver into her office, and they both collapsed into a chair.

"I didn't think you would actually come," Leliana remarked.

"I had a choice?" Carver raised a brow. Leliana's letter had been passionate. He set the helmet aside. "Gathering prominent figures in one place invites an attack."

"So the Divine shouldn't hold a conclave at all?" Leliana rhetorically asked. "The mages and Templars will be invited to a venue where neither side would wish to perform violence. The Chantry is sacred ground, but given the recent attempt on the Divine's life, the conclave will instead be held in—"

"A temple," Carver finished. "The Temple of Sacred Ashes, specifically. Elissa and the rest of us combed through Haven's tunnels ourselves, and I'm sure you've seen the pilgrimage maps. Securing that venue is a logistical nightmare."

Leliana pursed her lips. "Not without aid from the Grey Wardens and vetted mercenaries."

Carver scoffed. "Like Tal-Vashoth."

"Neutral parties uninvested in the war," Leliana reasoned.

She refrained from biting her lip. When the Divine had handed her

and Cassandra the emergency writ for an inquisition, the question of an inquisitor had arisen. However, both the Hero of Ferelden and the Champion of Kirkwall had declined to fill the role if called to.

Elissa had emphasised her neutrality as a warden, and that her interference in Circle matters during the blight had been supported by legal warden documents. If she had been close to apostates during the blight, she “couldn’t say” where they were now. Likewise, Elissa was grateful yet not moved that Arl Eamon, Bann Teagan, and their sworn soldiers still remembered her contribution to the felling of a demon and undead army in Redcliffe — a story that stuck with Templars who heard it even now. Meanwhile, Garrett Hawke refused to be propped up as some figurehead for people living as far as across the continent from him. He had to deal with enough controversy as it was, being a mage ruler, a former mercenary of noble and commoner Marcher and Ferelden blood, an apostate untrained by the Circle yet with a fraternity leader for a sister, and a lover to an elf who had killed his former Tevinter master.

No other public figures had the acknowledgement of both mages and Templars, and while Leliana had composed songs about Carver, he stubbornly clung to anonymity when he could. Claiming he was not only “the Carver,” but a sibling to the Fade-touched Hawkes without his willingness to back it up — much less posture with it — would prove fruitless. The same could be said of other people with vague reputations that Leliana knew of. The Divine’s circle had to contend with having no inquisitor written into the back-up plan, for now.

Leliana continued. “The conclave is a Chantry-driven event, yet we can’t call on Templars or Seekers to run protection. Cassandra and I are short of resources to match the scale of the assembly.”

“I can’t in good conscience send people to an attractive target,” Carver replied. “All of the Chantry’s and its institutions’ major players in *one* place? We’re fortunate enough that the venue is this far south and deep in the mountains from Tevinter. At least we would know to station the bulk of our security in the oldest and least explored levels of the temple, since the conclave’s greatest threat is spiders or dragonlings crawling out from ancient tunnels.”

“Well,” Leliana quirked her lips, “if you dislike the idea of the conclave so much, then help me organise the security yourself.”

Carver opened his mouth, realising he had walked himself into the ambush. Leliana’s friend grumbled. “I’ll forward your concerns to my

commander and inform you if the king's army can assist."

X

Maybe, security around the Temple of Sacred Ashes would be *so tight*, Corypheus and his enthralled wardens wouldn't be able to sneak in.

As if Carver could control everything.

He pinched his nose bridge with mounting stress. If he was leading the Ferelden part of the conclave's security, he had to keep himself grounded in the present. Shielders and soldiers of the king's army coloured the snowy mountainside of the temple and Haven in silver, white, red, and gold. Carver noticed Cullen walking around in an orange surcoat over his armour and a red, feathery fur stole scarf wrapped over his cuirass and under his pauldrons.

While Leliana said nothing, Carver knew Cullen was present as part of the Divine's back-up plan for an inquisition. Cullen's orange and red clothing probably referred to Kirkwall and Ferelden respectively, marking his neutrality while reflecting his origins. The thought of Kirkwall excited Carver's acidity. At least he had managed to persuade — beg — Bethany to keep the Illuminati out of the conclave. After all, Grand Enchanter Fiona and Lord Seeker Lucius — successor to the recently missing Lord Seeker Lambert — were sending delegates and not attending themselves, in case of a trap.

As individuals involved in the temple's protection, Carver and Cullen worked together the most, since other tasks evidently demanded Cassandra and Leliana's attention. Carver had to awkwardly confirm Cullen's suspicions that he was indeed Bethany's other brother, the one that was in Maric's Shield and had tattled on Kirkwall's Chantry to Cassandra. Cullen thought he had recognised Carver's appearance. Apparently, the stress of serving as Kirkwall's knight-commander had piled so high, when Cassandra had invited Cullen to the Chantry, he had accepted on the spot. Carver's passing likeness with Bethany had given Cullen flashbacks.

Now, they coordinated amicably. Since Cullen was technically the full-time member of the conclave's security, Carver as the third-party assistance answered to him. The blonde was flustered to have to approve of Carver's suggestions or to have the power to order Carver around, aware that Carver's military experience outstripped Cullen's. A round of Wicked Grace nourished Cullen's confidence once he learned Carver's tell. It was worth a lighter coin purse.

Carver raised a brow as he noticed Shielder armour entering Haven's Chantry. Two chambers in Haven's largest structure were currently serving as Cassandra and Josephine's temporary offices, while Leliana and Cullen worked in stone buildings in the village that suffered less foot traffic. Carver had been meaning to check on the hidden passage in the Chantry's sanctuary that Haven's cultists had built, and that privileged Chantry priests had performed summer pilgrimages through before the Urn of Sacred Ashes had disappeared. Carver wondered what business Cassandra or Josephine could have with soldiers under Carver's care.

As Carver strolled down the Chantry, he passed by a room next to Cassandra's office with its door propped open by a Ferelden soldier. The soldier and her friends were facing the centre of the room, most of them crouched or sitting on the ground, laughing. When the Shielders ahead of Carver strode into the room, the soldiers swiftly silenced, caught off-guard.

Carver recognised Daveth animatedly gesture. "We was just watchin' the Seekers' guest, sers. The lady leader summoned the ones stationed here, an' called us over to keep the guest in one place before they returned."

Another soldier quickly nodded in confirmation, her short bangs flying.

One of the Shielders, Maker's Breath, crossed his arms. "Seeker Cassandra called *all* of you here?"

The soldiers shifted in place guiltily.

Daveth angled himself towards the centre of the room. "The guest started makin' small talk, an' it'd be rude to ignore a mate, yeah? His stories can crack a man up."

The motion drew the Shielders' attention to the guest in the centre of the room hidden by the small crowd of soldiers. By the time Carver reached the sanctuary doors, he heard the Shielders joining in the soldiers' laughter at the guest.

Who spoke with a familiar voice.

Carver pivoted for the room.

The Shielders had joined half of the soldiers on the ground, elbowing each other in shared humour. At the sight of Carver, however, Maker's

Breath bolted to his feet and saluted.

“Ser!”

The entire room hastily straightened and saluted.

Carver caught sight of a certain dwarf in a chair. He choked.

“*Tethras?*”

Varric twisted in his chair to look at Carver. “What in — *Shiny?*”

Carver sighed. “Dismissed.”

As one, the Shielders and soldiers filtered out of the room and closed the door behind them. Varric gave Carver’s armour and cloak a once-over, gaze briefly snagging on mended damage Carver had earned from surviving a fallen tower.

“Shit. You *are* in charge.”

“Why are you here?” Carver demanded.

Varric innocently raised his hands. “Ask the lady Seeker. She’s somehow misled into believing I can shed more light on red lyrium than what Hawke, Stannard, and I have already told her— Woah, getting touchy-feely, are we?”

Carver continued searching Varric’s coat. “Tethras, you’ve invaded my privacy more than once.” He withdrew. “You have a shard of red lyrium.”

Varric patted his coat down. “Why would I want anything to do with Bartrand’s stupid idol?”

“A shard from it,” Carver corrected. “Rivaini parchment in your pockets. You managed to find a buyer in Rivain who bought Bartrand’s former mansion unseen, but you had to resolve rumours of it being haunted. That’s where you found the shard. Cassandra wouldn’t drag you with her to her work over dust, meaning you didn’t destroy it. I wouldn’t trust Bianca.”

Varric reared back in his chair.

“You have to find surface dwarves skilled in lock-smithing somewhere,” Carver reasoned. “It was wise of you to schedule your researchers on a rotation; reduces the risk of enthrallment to the ‘song.’ I would tell Cassandra what you know.”

Varric twitched as Carver passed him. “You’re just going to leave me here unattended?”

“If you leave Haven, it’s on my head.” Carver opened the door and raised a brow at him. “You don’t want to face the consequences.”

X

The day of the divine conclave finally arrived, and a sea of Chantry, mage, and Templar authorities streamed into the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Carver had the honour of shaking Divine Justinia’s hand in private before he left her to compose herself for the assembly. Justinia had quietly thanked him for his theory on the origins of Tranquility. Leliana, Cassandra, Cullen and Josephine stayed in Haven to oversee the passage to the temple and the crowd that had gathered. While only officials like revered mothers, enchanter, or knight-captains were allowed entry, people of lower ranks had also followed their leaders to the mountains. Carver, his soldiers, and vetted mercenaries were alone to stand guard over the conclave.

As the opening of the conclave drew near, Carver double-checked the security. In as massive and endless a maze as the temple, Carver and Cullen’s forces had to manage the venue through patrols. They lacked the manpower to have someone stand guard at every blindspot and point of entry. Carver nodded to sentries of the lowest secure level, before descending for the older floors of the temple that hadn’t been renovated.

*Tap tap tap taP TAP TAP.*

Carver warily located the sound of approaching footfalls, before something suddenly ran into him from around a corner.

“Oof!”

Carver caught a woman from stumbling, startled. His torch clattered on the ground. “What are you doing here? This section is off-limits!”

The woman jerked away, clutching a staff. In the awkward angle of light, Carver recognised the leaf-shaped cut of Keeper or First armour. Only the Illuminati counted Dalish among them, and Bethany had sworn to focus her fraternity on maintaining order in the Free Marches. Just as Carver opened his mouth to question the stranger, a woman’s cry hollowly echoed from around the corner, faint as if it had risen from the lower levels of the temple.



Carver cursed. “Stay here.”

The stranger reached out after him as he drew Summer Sword and hurried past her down crumbling stairs. “Wait, you’re going alone —!?”

The stranger’s voice faded as Carver stumbled into a scene of an armoured woman brandishing a sword and shield at a qunari male, who towered between her and a Carta thug. The three were armed, panting, and bore the roughed-up appearance of a recent exchange.

“Help, over here!” the armoured woman called over her shoulder to Carver. “The qunari are invading!”

“I’m a Tal-Vashoth, you ignorant human!” the male accused. He recognised Carver’s armour in his torchlight. “My ears are sharp; I heard scuffling in the lower levels and traced it to an elf and this dwarf trying to sneak in. Then this Templar ambushed me and let the elf escape!”

“Templar!? I’m a revered mother’s *guard*, you—!”

*BANG.*

Summer Sword intercepted the man and woman’s blades by a hair and exploded with holy light. The two warriors and the dwarf staggered back at the force.

Carver sheathed his sword. “Only permitted delegates are allowed into the temple. The two of you are coming with me.”

The woman and dwarf debated Carver’s hand on his pommel for a tense moment before grudgingly dropping their weapons and moving to his side. The Tal-Vashoth grumbled in hollow relief and angrily marched past them – before Carver caught his arm.

“Wait,” Carver demanded, freezing.

The three strangers impatiently turned to him. “What are you *waiting* for?”

“Do you hear—?” Carver asked, before shoving the man aside from the stairs without waiting for a response.

Sound became colour, light became torture, and touch became the iron stench of flesh and blood. Carver hadn’t debated if he had

imagined the faint echo of a lisping voice. Once he had heard it, he had instantly reacted, even if he would have ended up igniting the already frayed tempers around him. It didn't matter. He had guessed correctly.

The temple *exploded*.

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Agony.

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“More bodies!”

“Wait, I see breathing—”

“Don't move the rock—!”

***Pain.***

“Bride of the Maker, *stop it!*”

“We need stretchers!”

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Daylight piercing his senses like clouds rolling away from the sun.  
Jumbled gravity. Nausea.

Carver's eyes slitted open to blurred figures, before the world slowed. Cassandra had a hand on a soldier carrying the front half of a stretcher. The Seeker's lips formed the shape of Carver's name beneath knitted brows.

"C...."

Cassandra leaned into closer focus, voice gentle. "What?"

Carver lacked the strength for her name. His thoughts skipped ahead. "Four more...a Tal-Vashoth...a woman...a dwarf...an elf..."

"Me?" The Dalish woman from earlier crouched into sight. Fresh rope marks ran around her wrists. Her left hand glowed a brighter green than her hazel eyes.

Carver's lungs felt bound by rubber bands. He wheezed. "You... alright?"

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. She emotionally nodded. "I'm going to try to close the big rift."

Carver's eyes slid shut against his will. "Know...you will."

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Sorrow.

Carver wished he hadn't heard. Three bodies piled over one meant one survivor. Someone else had cheated death again.

Three people who could have become heroes.

The murmurs of healers faded out.

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Carver groaned, his throat cracking with the pain of razors. He felt someone beside him shift with movement, before he opened his eyes to a cup of water. His gaze travelled past it to grey-purple eyes.

“*You—!*”

Phantom blades snipped Carver’s strength, and he collapsed bonelessly back into a cot.

“You shouldn’t move,” Solas helpfully stated.

Carver wanted to wring his neck.

Solas wiped water off of his roughspun garments, picked up the cup from the ground, and scooped it into a nearby basin. When he held it before Carver, the latter reluctantly parted his lips and drank the water tipped into his mouth. After he drained the cup, Solas set it aside.

“You *are* capable of rationality,” Solas observed. Carver felt belittled. “I mended your wounds, but only time and sustenance will restore your internal body and strength. One must vigilantly exercise the mind in this period of healing.”

“Why?” Carver croaked.

Solas tilted his head a degree. “The loss of one’s faculties is the most dangerous injury of all.”

“Don’t be smart.” Carver turned his head to face Solas. The motion spent half of his strength. “You healed me and now seek an exercise – a negotiation. After learning my password, what will stop you from slitting my throat?”

As the words left his mouth, Carver already knew Solas wouldn’t disrespect an agreement. The sage merely levelled an unimpressed look at Carver before leaning back on his stool. The wooden structure

around them was absent of healers, housing only unconscious patients and a recent graduate, Carver. From the faint dust, Carver recognised he was in the equivalent of a coma ward, or an infirmary dedicated to sedated patients.

“You set the terms of your death,” Solas reminded. Carver couldn’t tell if the description was genuine. “The self-proclaimed Elder One hinders both our plans with his recklessness. Like a sip of water, I would reverse his momentum with assistance.”

Carver choked. “My help,” he deadpanned.

Solas’ gaze darkened, eternal and bottomless. “You have remarkably low self-esteem.” That was the first compliment Carver had heard from him, and just as unprompted and thin as Carver would have expected. “My network investigated yours to the extent capable, and in your rippling effects I read one who both heeds the imperceptible and spins it as a spider in a web.”

“Maybe I can just see the future,” Carver replied.

The planes of Solas’ face shifted, insulted.

In Solas’ perspective, the fact that Carver had been able to accomplish what he did meant that his journal *had* to be a secret, insightful map of the world’s politics. One in which Carver had not only laid out Thedas’ true history, but also the current shape of granular events and how to manipulate them – thus saving Solas the legwork. Carver even knew around when Solas would awaken and what his plans were, down to how Corypheus would mess up. With Corypheus’ recent actions, Solas and the mind behind the journal had a reason to work together for a cause. Though a man could go a day without water, why wouldn’t he sip what he could find? Carver was a rational convenience.

Carver sighed. “You and I suspend our plans. Our networks don’t interfere with each other. So long as we’re committed to hunting down Corypheus, we’re not going to aim for each others’ lives.”

“I’ll have my orb,” Solas stated.

“And Corypheus will permanently die,” Carver added. “Punishment enough for someone who screwed up your plans, right?”

Solas slowly stood up. “Careful what you wish for...Carver.”

Carver watched him leave the infirmary. “Solas,” he dismissed.

The hidden god paused, then closed the door behind him.

## Chapter End Notes

We’re in DAI, now! It’s the year 9:41, so Carver is 28 years old.

While Carver’s eyes are cyan blue in-game, I don’t think cyan is a common term, so I’ve let Leliana (and past people) describe Carver’s eyes as electric blue. Since belts of electric resistance exist in-game, it stands to reason that “electric” is part of Thedas’ vocabulary. Carver has also called Solona’s eyes electric blue before, since their eye colours are similar enough from his perspective. He additionally called Solona’s eyes “steel blue” as he spent time around her.

It was a tough decision to allow only one DAI origin to live! However, with the cast expanding into DAI, I have to be easy on myself as a writer. For fun, the 1H human warrior would have gone through a transformation from racist to die-hard comrade (like Pressly from Mass Effect). The 2H qunari warrior would have inspired Thedosians to see past his horns and find a man worthy of deep respect. The dwarf rogue would have skipped past tall people drama to quietly amass a small fortune through trade and join Sera’s pranks on the side.

# Captain

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the time Carver could carry a sword again, Ellana Lavellan had recruited First Enchanter Vivienne, the Friends of Red Jenny, and the Bull's Chargers.

Since Carver and the three strangers had been far beneath the source of the explosion, and due to the way the four of them had been tossed to the ground, Carver and his gear hadn't suffered irreparable injuries. A volunteer's careless actions with a boulder had in fact dealt the worst damage to him as he and three corpses had been excavated from the ruins. It meant that Harritt, a blacksmith from Redcliffe now serving the newly-established Inquisition, had been able to rescue Summer Sword at the cost of its sheath. Carver kept his sword in an ill-fitting sheath while he awaited Harritt's team to smith him a new one and repair his armour.

From Leliana's recounting, Ellana had stumbled out of the rift in the temple with a mark on her hand, and no memory of the temple. An echo in the Fade had revealed that after Carver had told Ellana to stay put, the woman had run up floors away from where he had gone, before being drawn to a room where she had heard Justinia being attacked by a blurred figure. Since a female silhouette had been seen in the rift Ellana had tripped out of, the people in Haven generally believed that Andraste had sent Ellana to them. The belief had spread like wildfire out of Haven, shaking the foundations of Val Royeaux.

Suddenly, everyone had to choose an answer to the question, "is Lavellan the Herald of Andraste?" Leliana's spies hadn't dissuaded a positive.

Everyone Carver knew in Haven had been wrecked by the conclave explosion, and reminded of it by the Breach in the sky. Leliana especially blamed herself for not heeding Carver's warning, despite his dismissal of it. His and Justinia's figures in the Fade echo were part of the reason why Ellana had been deemed innocent of the explosion.

Ellana's initiative and commitment to returning order to affected lands was another part. The First of Clan Lavellan had apparently been sent by her Keeper to assess the mage-Templar conflict's impact on the

People — for not all Dalish were in the Illuminati — and investigate how Divine Justinia might balance the scales of war before the world could crumble into itself. Now, Ellana found herself responsible for finding the answer.

So much demanded the Herald of Andraste's attention, that she and her party hadn't stopped by Haven in three months. Guided by Cassandra and accompanied by those who were just above strangers to her – i.e. Solas and Varric – Ellana had addressed mage, Templar, and bandit devastation in the Hinterlands; the abandonment of Seekers and Templars in Val Royeaux; and now a religious cult in the Storm Coast. The Circles had crumbled, and civil war had finally broken out in Orlais. Southern Thedas was consumed in mayhem.

Trained by the blight, Ferelden was keeping afloat of complete anarchy. Its citizens from the peasantry to the nobility stuck together and made room where needed, sweeping out messes everywhere else. However, the king's army and local lords' forces were still stretched thin putting out fires while suffering ambushes along patrol routes. All but two Shielders and a handful of Ferelden soldiers had survived the conclave explosion. When Carver wrote to Nails that he was alive, he learned that the king hadn't ceased writing letters to the lost soldiers' families. While not even a third of the king's army and Maric's Shield had been sent to assist in the conclave, Ferelden had still lost many good men and women. Cailan wanted Carver and the rest of the survivors to return to Denerim.

When Carver informed his fellow survivors that they were permitted to return home, they stood at attention and rejected the offer. They could see what Haven and humble places like it were suffering. Carver thus wrote to Nails that given the smaller numbers of the king's army, Carver and his soldiers were cooperating with the young Inquisition to best quickly return order to Ferelden. Carver could take the heat; he wasn't abandoning his people to a cause he himself believed in.

Since Carver was the last Ferelden soldier to recover from his injuries, a number of his soldiers had already integrated themselves into the Inquisition's forces. As the Inquisition's Head-Commander, Cullen arranged, trained, and led a force composed of surviving soldiers and mercenaries that had chosen to stay after the explosion, along with new volunteers. The soldiers and mercenaries had earned a place in the upper ranks given their relative experience, while the volunteers outnumbered them, filling the rest of the upper ranks, on to the lowest of ranks, until finally composing the initiates still in training. Predictably, those volunteers didn't know which end of a weapon to



hold, but had spirit.

Carver accepted Cullen's request and supported the commander with his military experience. While Carver was restricted to the training yard until he was fully recovered, he advised on the Inquisition's patrol routes and the recapture of Crestwood's Caer Bronach from bandits. Slotted in as an Inquisition captain, Carver also helped coordinate the Inquisition's overall forces. In the time Carver had been bedridden, Cullen had installed a former knight-captain named Rylen as his Lieutenant-Commander, and Maker's Breath — born Flanagan — and a now absorbed mercenary group's leader named Xanthe as captains. Carver and his fellow captains worked together to kick the Inquisition "army" into shape. No one among them wasn't there because they hadn't volunteered for it.

Consequently, the three captains shared a room in a wooden building that had formerly served as a local workshop. The conclave explosion's debris had rained over Haven, crushing people and damaging buildings. The Chantry alone miraculously stood unscathed. The survivors in Haven had thus repurposed any space with four walls into lodging, storage, or infirmaries. Tents had been erected for anything else, including additional lodging as skilled workers were summoned to Haven every week.

Cullen and Leliana's offices had been among the victims, so Cullen, Cassandra, and Josephine shared one room in the Chantry while Leliana claimed another as a spymaster. Carver was amused to discover that Leliana had recruited Daveth as one of her scouts. With Cassandra constantly in the field, Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine grew close just as Carver and his roommates did.

When Carver asked about the state of Redcliffe, Xanthe shared that after the conclave explosion, the surviving mages that hadn't been allowed entry to the meeting had followed Fiona's call to the arling of Redcliffe, where Arl Eamon had granted provisional lodging in its taverns. However, the arl's generosity had gradually laxened the bounds of his invitation, until not just delegates but all mages with a loyalty to the Circles arrived in droves of hundreds. Fiona and her people were camped outside of Redcliffe Castle and demanding they be allowed in to reduce the overpopulation and regather themselves.

Xanthe couldn't say if Arlessa Isolde had any influence in her husband's decision, so Carver turned to Leliana. She confirmed that Eamon's invitation had been driven by a desire to ease Connor's homeless situation and Isolde's desire to see her son. If the couple

hadn't parted from their firstborn on good terms, they wouldn't have been exempted from infertile stress. Now in the current timeline, Isolde had a young daughter she wanted to introduce to Connor.

Carver could deduce that Connor was refusing special rights to lodge in the castle with his family, hence Fiona and the mages' ability to stretch Eamon's hospitality to the current lengths. Connor owed a complicated loyalty to his fellow mages while feeling replaced by his sister without blaming her. Now staying in Redcliffe, guilt over his past possession also added pressure on the young man.

Though Carver sent a letter to Elissa asking if Alistair could write to Connor, Carver's letter bounced back to him. Apparently, the Grey Wardens had sealed their keep in Soldier's Peak from the outside world shortly after the conclave explosion. All forms of contact were rebuffed by the keep's high walls. Given the keep's cellars, the wardens were likely still alive inside, and would continue to last for months. The fact worried Carver, knowing that in his last written exchange with Solona, he had told her about his experience with Corypheus and included a warning: if all wardens suddenly heard the Calling, it could possibly be artificial in nature. Carver lacked evidence to suggest his words had any impact on the wardens' current state.

As for the men and women still loyal to the Templar Order, the walls of Therinfal Redoubt likewise spurned contact. Carver's professional acquaintances shared that compared to the mages squatting outside Redcliffe Castle, the banns and arls of the southron hills were unaffected by the Templars' isolation. No mere persuasion could convince the local lords to poke the political hornet's nest. The Seekers had also eerily vanished ever since their lord seeker's abandonment of the Chantry.

Then Ellana Lavellan returned to Haven with her party, and declared she wanted to recruit both mages and Templars into the Inquisition.

X

"Hawke's going to *kill* you," Varric spluttered at the sight of Carver. "Sunshine, too. Have you written to them that you're *alive*?"

An awkward moment of shock answered him. Maker, *of course* Varric would update Garrett on what the merchant prince last knew of Carver's state. Carver had been so consumed with work that he had forgotten about his family. If word had spread far enough between

Carver's relations in the Free Marches, Leandra herself was likely leading the line to strangle Carver.

Cassandra snorted in amusement while confused looks passed through Ellana's party at Varric's outburst. They probably wondered how a random Inquisition soldier could inspire direct aggression from the Champion of Kirkwall. Carver noted that the party consisted of most if not all possible companions, though the Iron Bull's large frame hid much past Ellana.

Said woman stepped towards Carver with an offered hand. "It warms my heart to see you on your feet, Ser Carver."

Carver shook her hand. "Please, Your Worship, just Carver will do."

Her smile seemed to reflect off the snow falling around them, lighting up the air. "Then call me Ellana. I don't hear my name often enough."

Ellana's brief giggle nearly inspired one out of Carver, her vibrancy contagious. Faint tree branches traced her cheekbones in mirroring silver ink like mercurial wings: the simplified vallaslin for Mythal. They curved with her unrelenting cheer despite the burden on her shoulders, though she didn't show it. Carver retreated to Cullen's side as Ellana's companions split up at the Chantry's doors. Cassandra alone followed Ellana in as Cullen, Josephine, and Carver escorted her to the sacristy now serving as a war room.

Ellana moved spryly and with grace, her willowy form seemingly raising musical notes as her feet padded on the Chantry floor. Midnight black hair tumbled down her shoulders in loose, buoyant loops, and when her tall figure passed a torch mounted on a Chantry wall, stars showered through her curls. A dutch headband braid pulled them back from Ellana's face, which glowed with an expressiveness, always teetering on the edge of another emotion. Yet in her overflowing youthfulness, Carver could sense a settled wisdom deep within them like the presence of a boulder felt from downstream. Her true age escaped him.

"The Templars refuse to speak to anyone," Cullen stated the instant the door behind them closed, "and the situation in Redcliffe is a forest fire waiting to ignite."

"Which is why Carver is here," Leliana added with a gesture.

Ellana turned to him in confusion.

Carver sighed. Leliana had requested he escort Ellana to the war room – and had failed to detail that he would further contribute. Regardless, the bard often got her way.

“A Tevinter cult has bound Grand Enchanter Fiona and her mages to servitude in exchange for protection and eventual Tevinter citizenship.” Founded in Haven, the Inquisition chose to observe Ferelden naming conventions and address everyone by first name. Carver continued. “The cult’s main hand in the south is currently Magister Gereon Alexius – however, his son Felix opposes the cult’s ideology and can be reasoned with. As for Therinfal—”

“A moment,” Ellana interrupted. “How could you possibly know that?”

Leliana’s lips thinned. “Last my scouts confirmed, Grand Enchanter Fiona returned to Redcliffe from Val Royeaux informing her people to prepare for Ellana’s arrival.”

Carver looked at her. “After your scouts pulled out, rifts appeared around the borders of Redcliffe Village, correct?”

Cassandra drawled, “Hardly unusual given the circumstances.”

“I predict that you’ll find these rifts unusual,” Carver replied. “Felix Alexius was a student at the University of Orlais, gifted in maths rather than magic. Magister Gereon was a proponent of education in Minrathous and valued intellectual betterment over Tevinter’s war against the Qunari. His research in the theoretically impossible was close to a breakthrough before Felix contracted the taint travelling from Orlais to Hossberg for the winter holidays. After years of seclusion, I’m not surprised a dramatic Fade-driven event like the Breach has drawn the magister to Ferelden in hopes of culminating his research into action: time travel. Of course, Magister Gereon can’t journey anywhere without bringing his ill son with him. The rifts around Redcliffe are a result of the magister’s return to his studies, and will bend time around them oddly should you draw near.”

Had Haven any crickets, Carver would have heard them.

“I have...” Ellana spoke slowly, “no words.”

“A Tevinter cult,” Josephine delicately deadpanned.

Carver waved a dismissive hand. “Nationalist supremacists. You don’t have to believe me. The point is, if Arl Eamon resorts to sending his

soldiers to eject the mages from Redcliffe, he risks announcing his political stance on the broken Circles. Offering the Inquisition up as alternate mediators allows Arl Eamon to denounce our actions if we fail. Technically, we're Orlesian."

Ellana spluttered, but Josephine pointed a quill to the air. "That's true."

Carver nodded to Ellana. "The spokesperson for mages in Redcliffe *will* be open to dialogue with you, Herald. Ellana. The leader just might not be who you think. To avoid a forest fire as Commander Cullen words it, I suggest requesting to meet in the solemn grounds of a Chantry."

The Dalish woman raised a brow. "Will that work?"

"No." Carver didn't hesitate. "Magister Gereon will summon you to a tavern instead, then Redcliffe Castle if he and his cult succeed at stealing it from Arl Eamon. Redcliffe's Chantry is beset by one of the magister's strange rifts, and no peaceful discussion can be held in it."

Leliana leaned on the war table, gaze falling to the ink marking Redcliffe on a map. "If the Herald is denied a meeting in the Chantry, then we'll assume you're correct, Carver. In which case, I suspect you have a plan for if a crowd of rebel mages overtake a castle?"

"You won't like it," Carver addressed the room's occupants as a whole. "If it comes to that, then I'll be happy to disappoint you with my idea. For now, I hope you prove my conjecture wrong, Ellana."

Cullen groaned, massaging his temples. "Dare I ask your interpretation of the Templars' actions?"

Carver dithered.

Cassandra huffed. "Just spit it out."

"The Breach has opened the way for an assortment of demons to cross over," Carver reasoned. "Lord Seeker Lucius' strange behaviour might indeed be not *his* actions, per say, but an envy demon's. From the top, it can manipulate the rest of the Order—"

"Now I've heard it all," Cullen vehemently rejected.

"Pressure Therinfal Redoubt with the presence of nobles," Carver turned to Ellana, "and you will only delight the envy demon. Your

display of influence will attract its appetite. The moment it extends an invitation for you to enter Therinfal Redoubt, you're in danger."

Cullen shot Cassandra a look. "Conjecture."

The Seeker agreed. "The only realism to be heard is that of all demons to target a Seeker, one that disposes of rather than possesses its prey would stand a chance. A drop of water can better douse a fire than a dry leaf."

Seekers were immune to possession, on top of their ability to battle the arcane. Cassandra merely stated fact.

Carver caught Leliana's gaze. "Happy?"

"I'll have my spies look into Therinfal Redoubt," Leliana decided, acknowledging everyone's expressions. "Regardless of my feelings, Carver is usually right. The Herald can safely test Carver's theory against the mages in Redcliffe, but she'll be in danger the moment we send her to Therinfal Redoubt if Carver is correct. I'll look into what options we have for addressing the rogue Templars while Lady Ellana can personally determine if time-warping rifts exist in Redcliffe."

Josephine sighed. "At least the rebel mages are open to speaking with us. All the diplomacy in the world won't shake Templars if they refuse to even listen."

After the meeting, Carver located Varric in one tent among many erected in Haven.

Carver begged. "I don't suppose you know how to wordsmith an apology letter?"

Varric lifted his head from unpacking his things. He hadn't had a room to sleep in since the conclave explosion had crushed most of them. "When someone closes their tent, Shiny, it means they seek privacy."

"You've broken into my room more times than I can count," Carver returned, sitting down outside of Varric's tent and tying the flap back. The space only accommodated a dwarf like Varric and not the addition of a human huddled in a red cloak. "The faster you spare me your golden wisdom, messere, the faster I'm out of your hair."

Varric's lips twitched upwards. "Flattery gets you nowhere."

"I'll buy you a drink."

"Nor bribery, for that matter."

"I won't tell anyone about the real Bianca."

"You best not!" Varric snorted. "If her family catches wind of us having met in the past year, they'll send *Carta assassins* after me."

Carver crossed his legs. "How's intimidation doing?"

"Now I see what Hawke means by insufferable," Varric muttered, rising. "Close the flap, I'm freezing."

They found a corner in the local tavern muddled by the noise of the approaching lunch hour, and unfurled blank slips of parchment. The two of them worked through letters for Garrett, Bethany, and Leandra while the lunch rush came and went, loud enough to conceal Carver and Varric's discussion. In the transient form of privacy, they also caught up and tested whose stories were built on truth or not. Varric almost always flavoured his accounts of Garrett before and after Carver's time in Kirkwall with exaggeration or misdirection, while Carver consistently downplayed his experiences or credited them to other people.

The two of them revisited the tavern the next day for a sequel, then the next day, until they began to understand each other's language. Sometimes their lunch overlapped with members' of the Chargers or soldiers' who worked under Carver, but Carver merely ignored the former or nodded to passing salutes from the latter when the crowd entered the tavern. Carver preferred to keep to himself when possible. Varric was rarely without ink and parchment in hand and seemed to be recording Carver's quirks, though the storyteller refused to allow a glimpse of his writings or confirm if Carver was merely being self-centred.

Carver feared which one he preferred.

The day Harritt's farrier passed on to him that his armour and sheath were complete, Carver visited the forge and ran into Thom Rainier.

"Need something?" Thom glanced over a crate he was carrying.

Carver stared at the silver needlework in his clothes. "Griffons."

"I'm a warden." Thom fixed his collar, griffons slipping east into the

wane of a new moon. A clasp must have fallen loose. "Though don't tell anyone. I'm technically on the run."

Thom's bearded chuckle affected the air of a jest, but Carver watched him tromp off to a distant pile of crates. The awkward quilting in Thom's clothes must have sourced from the fact that the warden was wearing them inside-out. The Orlesian Order had vanished the same time Soldier's Peak had clammed up. If all wardens were hearing the Calling, had Thom's response been to run away? No, if the Wardens were after him, that meant he had disobeyed an order. Witnessing his superiors make abominations out of his comrades would drive a soldier like Thom to not abandon the Wardens, but oppose their orders.

Treason in the Wardens was always rewarded with execution.

Thom was wanted for *doing the right thing*.

Carver shook his head at the reversal and retrieved his new sheath and repaired armour. The sheath was white, unfortunately more eye-catching than its grey predecessor, but also fit perfectly. Meanwhile, the Theirin crest on his armour hadn't survived Harritt's metalwork, but the blacksmith had mended the damage with the black-and-white intertwined eye and sword of Andraste's heraldry. The symbol had been inspired by Visus, the constellation associated with the Maker, and later divided between the Seekers and Templars with flames added to delineate the sword as Hessarian's. Since the Divine Age, the Inquisition's colours had been white, charcoal grey, and scarlet, but when Carver declined Harritt's offer to add charcoal grey tinting to his armour, the smith proposed adding the green of the Herald instead.

The Herald of Andraste. Ellana already had colours to her name.

Carver sometimes passed the faithful thanking the Maker and His bride for sending Ellana to them, like she was the answer to their prayers physically manifested. Yet Ellana was still able to smile? Even a mountain would crumble under weathering gales.

Carver maintained his white and gold armour as-is, reasoning to Harritt that the set's colours best matched his golden dragonscale helmet which had survived the explosion unscathed. Adding more tints to the armour would detract its original form. Carver wore his armour and tossed his spare red cloak over it when Ellana and her comparatively smaller party returned from Redcliffe.

With an addition.



The Inquisition's training grounds and stables sat on either side of the road to Haven, which ended at the village's main gates. Ellana halted her party and veered off-course from the gates to find Carver slaying a dummy.

"Venatori," Ellana deadpanned.

"Cult," Carver aptly summarised, lowering his training sword.

Behind Ellana followed Cassandra, Solas, Vivienne, and a man practically sparkling in the snow with his spotless white robes and visible charm.

Ellana shook her head. "How did you know?"

Carver pointed his chin at the white robes. "An influx of arrivals to Gwaren wearing serpent or dragon embroidery? Definitely Tevinter. Considering this one is with you, he must be Magister Gereon's former protégé and Felix's friend, Dorian Pavus of Qarinus."

Not only did Dorian's white robes shimmer with a green-gold mirage of coiling serpents, but the subdued green leathers he wore beneath the layer betrayed an artificially broad, scaly texture in the light that resembled the hide of only one type of creature Carver had seen before. Tevinter maintained a respectful awe of dragons, at times a worshipfulness due to its ancient culture.

Ellana opened her mouth while Dorian delicately raised a brow. "My reputation precedes me."

"The black sheep of a family," Carver responded wryly. "I can relate." He remembered himself at the sight of Vivienne, having not introduced himself to her before, despite the fact she was officially sworn to the Inquisition. Carver placed a fist over his heart in the Inquisition salute, inclining his head. "Pardon my manners — Carver of Lothering, captain of Maric's Shield. Although, I suppose it's also of the Inquisition now."

Vivienne primly tilted her head in return. "Madame Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchanter to the Imperial Court of Orlais."

The first enchanter's hennin moved weightlessly upon her head, the woman herself as unruffled by the brisk mountain air as Varric, for her silk-lined coat opened her neck and bosom up to a delicate whisk collar. Not a few gazes in the training yard strayed to Vivienne's

enchanter coat, the unique cut ordinarily limited to linens roughly dyed in Chantry reds, blues, and yellows. In contrast, Vivienne wore a tailored, seamless design insulated with lavender brocade and had pearly shank buttons running down the front left flap. With a matching corset, pants, and boots underneath, Vivienne could have been in a gown. Carver had seen no mage like her before.

Ellana interrupted his thoughts with a gesture. “And this is Solas.”

Carver struggled to maintain a flat expression.

In the tense delay, Solas presented a hand, cutting off Carver’s response. “A pleasure.”

Carver grudgingly reached for his hand.

“—A moment?” Cullen physically and verbally cut in, addressing Ellana and Carver. The commander was already turning to escort Ellana to the Chantry.

Carver dropped his hand and followed them, resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder.

## Chapter End Notes

For visualization, [this](#) is Ellana’s vallaslin.

**Spoilers!:** I have a confession: the moment I saw [this fan art](#) of Solavellan, its Lavellan became the only Lavellan for me. They look so happy together! Which makes canon all the more bittersweet. Though I added curls to her hair, I can’t picture anyone else as Lavellan in this fic. Kudos to the artist!

# Guard

## Chapter Notes

**Spoiler alert for DA:Absolution:** So...canon is *really* twisted in this SE timeline thanks to...you know.... I knew that writing a fic while canon is still evolving would lead to intricacies like this, but hey! Maybe I can still keep the timeline easy to follow despite the changes? *Somehow?*

\*Sweats\*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the war room, Cullen revealed that word had just reached them about mages infiltrating Redcliffe Castle. By the time Haven had heard it, the castle would have already been captured. Directed by the skill of Tevinter cultists and a magister, the mass of rebel mages would have stood a chance. The events lined up with Carver's deduction, but when he proposed that the Inquisition should sneak into the castle through a secret passage and send Ellana to distract Gereon, the war room exploded.

Cullen whipped his gaze to Carver. "We can't send our only chance at sealing rifts to her death!"

Leliana frowned. "The secret passage is too narrow for troops. Only a squad of my agents would fit through."

Cassandra crossed her arms. "We would better fare in sieging the castle with our forces."

Josephine consulted her makeshift clipboard. "If we can delay answering Magister Gereon's invitation to the Herald, I can persuade Orlesian houses to bolster our forces."

Leliana shook her head. "We're already calling in all our favours to summon Orlesian nobles to Therinfal Redoubt."

Ellana noted the drain in political capital. "We're short of time. I can't walk nobles to Therinfal Redoubt's gates and simultaneously accept Magister Gereon's invitation. However, I hear the same solution to both problems: stealth, bolstered by strength. I can trust Varric and Sera to withdraw from a situation at the first sign of danger, and Thom would lead the charge to rescue them if they grew

overwhelmed. Leliana; if Orlesian nobles draw the Templars' attention to the front gates, is it possible to send your agents with Varric and Sera sneaking into Therinfal Redoubt? For everyone's safety, they should only aim to scout. In an emergency, one of your agents can open the gates and allow Thom and a squad of troops in."

Josephine straightened. "Insight on the Templars' activities would value highly with anyone."

Leliana held her chin in her hand. "A Dalish manoeuvre: send scouts ahead of back-up forces."

Ellana nodded. "The clan must survey elven ruins somehow, before confirming that they are safe to study and explore. The only difference here are that the spiders and bears are Templars."

"My senior agent will lead the scouting party," Leliana decided, "but Varric and Sera will support her as close seconds. What of the envy demon, if any?"

Cullen tossed Carver a look at mention of a demon, but replied, "A number of former Templars are in my ranks. I can send them with W— with Thom."

Carver glanced at the people in the room. Was Thom's identity a secret? How many of them knew?

Ellana searched Carver's face and sighed. "You already know."

"Deduced," Carver intoned. "He's on the run for trying to defend his fellow wardens from each other."

"Lost his recruiter, Warden Gordon Blackwall, to the mess," Ellana murmured. "Whatever controversy has consumed the Orlesian Order, Warden Gordon paid with his life opposing it. Warden Thom barely escaped thanks to his mentor."

Carver's brows furrowed. "He doesn't know why the wardens are arguing?"

"Only that after hearing the Calling, they've started killing each other," Ellana shared. "Willingly."

"Solo is too far in the Anderfels for quick communication," Leliana shared, gaze softening. "Carver, have you any insight? How is Soldier's Peak faring?"

At the helpless shake of Carver's head, Leliana subtly wilted. Carver couldn't accuse wardens of creating abominations out of each other without proof. If Magister Livius Erimond had indeed preyed on the wardens' desperation over the Calling, Carver didn't know how to search for venatori movement in Orlais to support the hypothesis. So far as Carver could recall, Livius had no villain origin story in a certain timeline. Carver lacked the right to check his journal. Retrieving it from Solas would dishonour the spirit of their bargain, and temporarily glancing through it would risk Solas catching a glimpse of Carver's writings.

Ellana tactfully continued. "While Inquisition agents scout the Templars, I'll accept Magister Gereon's invitation. —It's *my* life on the line, here."

Cassandra had twitched at the statement and now gestured passionately. "You alone can seal rifts and inspire meetings with people like Mother Giselle and Magister Gereon. I swore to *protect* you the moment you agreed to join the Inquisition."

"And you will honour your vow," Ellana replied. The Seekers and the Dalish didn't share the contractual gravity of Antiva's oaths, and indeed the Seekers and Templars observed a promise as fealty while the Dalish treasured words as the People's lifeblood. However, the solemnity of a vow carried across backgrounds. "Magister Gereon must respect my decision to bring token delegates to our meeting. You'll be with me when I see him."

"In a castle brimming with mages?" Cullen remarked. "If the former Templars in our forces assist with Therinfal Redoubt, I'll have only soldiers untrained in battling the arcane to send with you. They can stand by outside of Redcliffe Castle for trouble, but they lack organisation against magical opponents."

Ellana suddenly chuckled, loosening the tautness in everyone's shoulders. "Who better to counter mages than a mage? I'm not the only Fade-touched agent of the Inquisition. Solas and Vivienne shall also accompany me. Vivienne might yet reason with Fiona, given their positions as public-facing enchanter. Dorian will also join Leliana's agents and intercept Magister Gereon's strange magic should the magister attack."

Carver straightened. "I've cleared out Redcliffe Castle once with Leliana and the Hero's party. If worst comes to worst and you have to fight your way out of the castle, I have your back."

Ellana's eyes twinkled with amusement. "You've cleared out a castle before?"

Leliana perked up with a particularly bardic air.

"Thrice," Carver hastily interjected. Château Haine was technically a small castle, or a fortress, and Vigil's Keep had been massive. *He* could sell *himself* and didn't need Leliana bursting into horrific song for him. "I'm a soldier, Your Worship, I've seen my fair share of battle. Allow me to guard the party's rear."

He had to prevent Gereon from throwing anyone forward in time – or worse, permanently erasing anyone.

Ellana smiled at Cassandra. "Sounds sufficient: two soldiers, three mages."

Cassandra clicked her teeth. "Too many variables."

"We must rescue Redcliffe and the mages from Magister Gereon somehow," Ellana reasoned. "The Iron Bull and his Chargers can join the troops to be stationed outside of Redcliffe Castle. If danger arises and Leliana's agents manage to open the gates, the bolstered numbers will cover more ground."

Carver raised a brow. "You've considered this thoroughly."

"I was the First of my clan," Ellana shared, "responsible for balancing the cultural needs of the People against the clan's needs. Among the Dalish, clans sometimes send small groups to support each other. I've motioned this tactic before; however, I fear I'll serve less effectively should a different puzzle arise in the future. A nomadic mindset benefits little for a fixed military like the Inquisition's. We can't collectively move and evade trouble like a leaf in the wind."

Carver thought of the devastation a dragon could incur. For a flying calamity, Haven was as much a target on the ground as a castle. He needed to somehow both persuade Solas to share Skyhold's location *and* convince the Inquisition to relocate to the isolated fortress, while erasing confusion and hesitation with believable responses.

Right.

Haven was *screwed*.

“Tarasyll’an Te’las,” Carver murmured.

Solas glanced at him from where they trailed behind Ellana and the rest of the party. “You’ve learned ancient elven since we last saw each other?”

“Who’s to say it’s not one of the few phrases I knew before tripping over you?” Carver grumbled. Ever since realising someone else had transmigrated into Thedas, they had memorised the original phrasing for “the place where the sky was held up.” It was a reminder of the possible cost of failing to avoid a certain future for Thedas. If Solas were to succeed in his plans, the sky would literally fall. “The Inquisition requires firm foundations, including a centre of operations. Should the Inquisition succeed at gaining the alliance of mages, Templars, or both, Corypheus will be incited into attacking Haven. A village on the mountainside won’t last his ire. Or will you simply whisper a token warning in Ellana’s ear?”

Solas’ gaze slanted at him. Despite their matching heights, Carver felt smaller. “You are using her just as I am.”

“With little effort,” Carver revealed. “She structured this operation.”

Solas looked ahead to watch Ellana greet a venatori guard of Redcliffe Castle. The guard led the party in. As the bustle of a crowded castle blanketed over them, Solas appraised Carver’s stiff posture.

“You don’t know where Skyhold is,” Solas observed.

Carver muttered. “You just love stating facts, don’t you.”

“Should Corypheus attack Haven, Ellana will survive,” Solas said. “I will make sure of it.”

Carver bitterly returned his focus to the front, pushing Solas out of his vision. “*Maker forbid* the one touched by your power vanishes without your consent.”

The party arrived at Redcliffe’s throne room, where the guard halted them halfway through. Gereon warmly welcomed Ellana from Eamon’s throne, explaining that he only sought the Herald’s company. For Gereon and Ellana’s initial discussion, they needn’t involve attachés. Carver moved to stand in the party’s front next to Cassandra as Ellana approached Gereon alone, and the moment a burnished amulet dangled into view from around Gereon’s wrist, Carver darted towards them. The amulet resembled the perfectly symmetrical focus

stones Carver had seen before in staves.

“Ellana, duck!”

The woman turned just as Carver unsheathed Summer Sword and threw it the way a certain Sten had taught him. Carver tackled Ellana aside from a burst of Fade energy just as Dorian leapt from the shadows with his staff and slashed it between them and Gereon. Magic shields flickered over Carver and Ellana seconds before they splashed into a metre of water.

“Haaaaa!”

The two of them resurfaced with a gasp for air, coughing. The bright interior of Redcliffe had suddenly plunged into darkness, lit only by dim, pulsing crimson and a leap of flames to their right. They turned to see Dorian remarking at his wet clothes while the tip of his staff sprouted with a steady fire. The decrepit remains of a stone cell stood around them, murky water stretching past the range of Dorian’s magic torch. Red lyrium speckled the walls. In the distance beyond Dorian’s fire, a column of red lyrium loomed, marking the height of the floor’s ceiling.

Two venatori in iron helmets sprinted towards the source of the commotion, the venatori’s torches revealing that Ellana, Dorian, and Carver were in a water-logged dungeon. Upon the sight of them, the venatori unsheathed two swords with a battle cry.

Dorian and Ellana instantly whipped out twin balls of flashfire, igniting their foes into a panic. When the venatori dove into the water, Carver hastily righted himself and caught one’s neck, snapping it. He immediately turned aside and hurled.

A gentle touch warmed Carver’s shoulder. Carver slowly stood up and followed Ellana’s hand dropping from his shoulder to white-knuckledly grip her staff. Dorian stood over the charred corpse of the other venatori with a brief sway in the mage’s stance. The three of them were visibly imbalanced.

“Red lyrium,” Ellana held a hand over her mouth with passing nausea, “has consumed this place like fungi.”

“We’re displaced in location *and* time!” Dorian burst with sudden, jovial energy. Despite his unsteady bearing, he excitedly whipped his head to Ellana and Carver. “Incredible, Alexius tore a hole in space-time itself! As if the world isn’t ruined enough!”



Ellana leaned on her staff for support. “You’re cheerfully negative.”

“I’ve laboured over Alexius’ theories for the bulk of my youth,” Dorian preened. “I can recognise when they’ve been actualised — through a rift, no less! If we can find Alexius’ amulet in this time, I can use it as a focus to reverse the spell and maybe return us to *our* time.”

Ellana squared her shoulders and trudged out of the flooded cell. “Let’s leave this place.”

Dorian twirled his staff and followed her. “I said *maybe*. It’s equally possible we’ll turn into paste.”

Carver picked up Summer Sword from the bottom of the cell and followed Ellana and Dorian out. Gereon’s rift must have swallowed the blade before touching Dorian, Carver, and Ellana. Gereon wouldn’t have allowed the rift to explode large enough to also consume him and his son. Carver carefully wiped his sword of water and sheathed it, watching the party’s rear while they climbed stairs for the dungeon’s next floor.

Dorian glanced at Carver. “Sorry, should I use lower-class customs of address? Magister *Gereon* as opposed to Alexius?”

Carver squeezed his cloak of water. “What?”

“Then you must have swallowed a lemon,” Dorian decided. “You’ve been wrinkling your face since my mentioning a punctured reality. Or has my rapid intelligence somehow insulted you?”

“Our *situation* irks me,” Carver answered. “You can’t tell if Gereon threw us forward or backward in time, but if it’s the former and we return to the past, will this timeline riddled with red lyrium still persist?”

Dorian delighted at the question. “You’re suggesting that returning to the past might hatch another timeline.”

“In which case if this timeline is doomed, should we not endeavour to save it?” Carver sighed. “This is why I don’t like messing with worlds.”

“Oh?” Dorian chuckled. “You’ve time travelled before?”

Carver quirked a brow. “If I have, how would you be able to tell? Perhaps by entering a timeline where I exist, a paradox resulted in the

displacement of the original Carver, leading to the continued existence of the one before you.”

“And in effect caused a random person’s grandparents to never meet,” Dorian played along.

Ellana glanced back at them with bell-like laughter despite their situation. “If you two weavers are done with your stories, I believe I hear movement beyond this door.”

Dorian’s staff flared with fire while Carver drew Summer Sword, before Ellana swung the door open and erected a wall of flames down the hall. Venatori archers cried out in agony while the party made short work of the venatori mages and warriors prowling the dungeons. At the end of the hall, they found Cassandra, Solas, and Vivienne locked in cells bursting with rocky red lyrium formations. Fine crimson dust danced in the air like mist. Cassandra, Solas, and Vivienne’s skin, mouths, and eyes pulsed with veins of red energy.

Ellana hurriedly freed them and drew them out of their cells to the hallway. Vivienne shied from her touch. “You shan’t, my dear, lest you acquire the infection.”

Carver unabashedly held his cloak over his mouth and fixed a distance between himself and the three infected members of their party. The gentle green in Ellana’s eyes trembled. She had travelled with Cassandra, Solas, and Vivienne through weeks of nonstop work. Separated from her clan and morally tied to the Inquisition, Ellana had few figures she could personally rely on.

Ellana held Vivienne’s hand, undeterred. “I’ll find a way to heal all of you.”

Cassandra raised her chin. “You can’t, Ellana. We will join the Maker soon. Through no fault of your own, your best won’t be good enough.”

“The past year might have been the blink of an eye for me,” Ellana insisted, “but I’ll not waste the months you endured without me in vain. What have you learned drives red lyrium, and how has it corrupted Redcliffe?”

Solas watched her. “The mark won’t undo red lyrium’s infestation of Thedas, Ellana. It is Fade-driven and unpredictable, useful only for sealing rifts. The source of red lyrium’s spread is instead a self-proclaimed god force-feeding everyone the substance and harvesting it from our corpses.”

“His zealots call him the Elder One,” Cassandra shared. “No one has personally faced him and lived to describe him beyond those two words. He organised the assassination of Empress Celene and gathered a demon army ever since you seemingly perished in a rift explosion.”

“I’ll cut this false god down,” Ellana promised. “Then we can research red lyrium and find a way to cleanse it from people.”

Vivienne made a disapproving noise in her throat. “We’re in the dungeon level aboveground. Glance outside the windows.”

Ellana and Dorian peered through gaps in the walls formed by invasive lyrium formations. They withdrew, stunned.

“The Breach has consumed the sky,” Ellana whispered, left hand hopelessly flexing. “I...I can....”

Dorian bumped her shoulder. “We can still risk becoming paste.”

Cassandra blinked. “What?”

Dorian and Ellana explained the situation while the infected members equipped fallen venatori’s weapons and the party searched for a path to the castle’s throne room. They opened doors to rooms bursting with red lyrium and sprouting legs or withered heads from it. One cell they passed by contained Fiona, looking one week away from becoming a red coffin herself. The grand enchanter’s sharp mind managed to provide a date, confirming that Ellana, Dorian, and Carver were exactly one year ahead in the future. The party also reached the torture chambers of the dungeon and failed to rescue an Inquisition agent from dying by a torturer’s hand, but chased their failure with blood. The next pained screams they heard received a better outcome.

“Leliana,” Carver breathed.

He undid the grey-skinned woman’s restraints and caught her as she fell. Leliana barely weighed anything, and smelled worse than the three infected members. Rope burns and scars on her skin implied that the torturer the party had killed had been interrogating her through asphyxiation and flaying. Leliana had been forcibly kept alive and away from red lyrium to ensure that she wouldn’t die without answering the venatori’s questions, while also providing *material* for their experiments.

“Gereon...throne room...” Leliana croaked.

Carver hoisted her up, straightening. “That’s where we’re headed.”

The hands that once deftly fired arrows now feebly clutched Carver’s cloak. “Take me...with you.”

Carver swallowed thickly at her insistence. “The bard often has her way.”

He propped Leliana against him and carried her weight as the party advanced out of the dungeons and through a courtyard, finally entering the castle’s main keep. With every step, Leliana seemed to gradually accept that the party was real, and regained her strength. By the fourth rift they encountered, she relieved a corpse of its daggers and boldly stabbed a demon. By the sixth, she found a bow and quiver, and began collecting arrows from more corpses.

They ran into a wall at the throne room. Or rather, a pair of massive stone doors. The structure’s natural colour and intricate engravings separated it from the castle’s original masonry. Five divots encircled the centre of the sealed doors. Dorian knocked on them, confirming the doors were as thick as a man.

The altus spluttered. “How did Alexius even move those things here, much less install them? There’s no getting through these doors — not without some manner of shards to unlock them.”

Solas had run his fingers over the divots and opened his mouth to speak, before Dorian’s last remark had stolen the wind from him. Carver caught Solas’ expression and smothered a twitch of his lips. Dorian was naturally brilliant, else Gereon wouldn’t have chosen Dorian as an apprentice for his research. Deducing the doors’ function didn’t require as great a leap of logic as space-time manipulation did.

Carver looted a fallen venatori mage and revealed a carved red lyrium shard that he reflexively dropped. “I believe I found a fifth of our key.”

The party tracked their turns and swept through the castle’s royal wings for more venatori mages. After gathering four more shards, the infected members of the party inserted the shards into the doors. A green light rippled through the doors’ engravings before they scraped open on their own. The party warily stepped into the throne room, searching shadows behind red lyrium formations for Gereon or more venatori, until finally finding Gereon and a shrivelled, hairless figure huddled together on the room’s dais. Gereon turned at their approach and hastily picked up his staff, pointing it at them.

“I knew you would come,” Gereon tiredly stared at Ellana. “It was just a question of when. I couldn’t erase you from history — just from one moment onwards, and for that the Elder One will kill me. He’ll kill us all.”

Solas’ brows furrowed. “You tried to prevent Ellana from gaining the mark. You went as far back as the conclave explosion.”

“And no farther,” Gereon bemoaned. “I can’t save Felix from his sickness, nor my wife from her fate. The Breach limits my magic in ways neither the Elder One nor I can divine. I am defeated.”

Carver choked. “How many alternate realities have you *created* in such madness? How does anyone know we’re in the ‘true’ timeline!?”

“Only one way to find out,” Dorian muttered, gaze twitching to an amulet around Gereon’s neck.

Leliana suddenly appeared behind the living corpse on the ground and slipped a dagger under its chin. “It’s over, Gereon.”

The magister staggered, hand outstretched. “*No!* Release Felix, I’ll do anything!”

Dorian paled, visibly shaken. “That’s...*Felix?* Alexius, what have you *done?*”

Ellana raised her hands placatingly. “No one has to die.”

A dark storm passed over Leliana’s face. “*Everyone* dies.”

She slit Felix’s throat.

A pained howl tore out of Gereon, piercing Carver’s heart as the room erupted into rifts, demons, and other warped effects from Gereon’s unrestrained magic. Carver quickly shoved Ellana behind him, taking the front and earning himself a blast of Fade energy from a demon.

“Stay behind me!” Carver demanded, gritting his teeth.

There were foundational truths that even Gereon’s spells had to respect. Though Carver couldn’t explain why Gereon’s time travelling had its limits, Carver trusted that the limits proved the existence of laws in reality, and Carver drew on that. Gereon was unlike any magical opponent Carver had faced, but Carver could trust in world order.

His racing thoughts had only lasted a second, before he suddenly calmed. Smiting Redcliffe's throne room?

This would be Carver's second time.

Holy energy *bloomed* out from him in a sea of white fire, knocking Gereon and demons to the ground. Weaker demons like wisps instantly dissipated. Carver cloaked his sword in a mana-draining strike at Gereon's desperate arcane bolts. Carver slipped past a rage demon with a slash, cutting it down and opening up space between him and the party so that his presence couldn't naturally hinder the mages from casting spells. Arrows, blades, and magic went flying, until finally Carver and Cassandra stood over a slain Gereon with wet swords.

Gereon had kept fighting even when Dorian and Ellana had set him aflame or when Solas and Vivienne had encased him in ice. The magister had been in agony the moment Felix had died.

The throne room abruptly shook with a distant draconic roar.

Leliana murmured, "The Elder One."

Solas set his staff down. "Perform the ritual and undo this past year."

Dorian blinked rapidly at Gereon and Felix's corpses, before clearing his throat with a nod. "Give me an hour."

"There might still be a way to mend the world," Carver interjected. "We can find a way to seal the Breach, then work from there——"

Leliana shook her head. "Carver...."

He met everyone's gaze. "Do you honestly wish to render what you endured over the past year meaningless? What if Ellana, Dorian, and I return to our time and your lives here still continue?"

"They won't," Cassandra stated heavily. She exchanged looks with Solas and Vivienne. "We'll hold the Elder One's forces back for as long as we can."

The three infected members left the throne room with raised heads and closed the heavy stone doors behind them with finality.

Leliana nocked her bow and faced the doors. "You have as much time as I have arrows."

Dorian snatched the amulet from Gereon's neck and Carver grabbed the magister's bladed staff, before they and Ellana raced to the room's dais. An eerie, muffled cacophony of shrieks and battle cries reverberated from the doors with growing volume, counting down to when Corypheus' demon and venatori army would slay everyone in the throne room. A trembling wrinkle in Dorian's brow betrayed his awareness beyond the floating, glowing amulet in his hands and the rift manifesting from it.

When the battle cries faded, Leliana raised her bow.

"Maker, though the darkness comes upon me, I shall embrace the Light."

*BANG.*

Once, twice, then the doors shattered, unleashing a horde of demons and venatori troops. Vivienne and Solas' bodies tumbled into the throne room, having pressed their backs into the doors till the end, and a towering terror demon shook Cassandra's body loose from its skewer-like claws as it strode in. Leliana's arrows crippled the front row of the army, but the horde seemed to only grow instead of shrink. So multitudinous were they that Leliana slowly walked backwards to maintain an angle on them, but the bard was set on buying Ellana's party time.

"Andraste, guide me. Maker, take me to your side!"

Leliana whipped her bow at the closest foe and drew her daggers in a rain of blood. A venatori suffered a slash to grab Leliana's arm, and immediately another venatori wrestled her into a grip. The terror demon raised a claw over Leliana just as the bard met Carver's gaze. The claw came down.

"Leliana!" Carver cried. He turned to Dorian, then Ellana to not interrupt the altus with a question. "How much *longer*?"

Ellana shook her head without an answer, readying her staff.

"Don't!" Dorian snapped warningly. "You leave the dais or use magic, we all die!"

The hair rose on the back of Carver's neck as the horde barrelled for them. Carver's presence was naturally hindering Dorian from completing his ritual as swiftly as Dorian had in a certain timeline.

Carver raised Gereon's staff like a spear and hurled it at the closest enemy. The terror demon went down, taking a few venatori with it. A slash of Summer Sword dismembered a sword arm aiming for Dorian's back, while a whip of Ellana's staff took out the feet from another enemy. Carver barely cut down an arrow aimed at his face just as another demon tore Dorian's back open with its claws.

A flash of green, and the three of them stumbled with the sudden loss of ground beneath them.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm taking a page out of Shakespeare's book and am inventing words — or at least, adding meanings. "Draconic" doesn't equate to "dragon-like," but I wrote so much content as if it is, so...we're just going to roll with it.

Like much in DAI, the trip to the future stirs up a lot of theories. When Solas' orb breaks, he decides to absorb Mythal's energy(?), then continues with his mission. However, in the future we see in Redcliffe, he ends up corrupted by red lyrium, doesn't absorb Mythal, and doesn't progress in his mission. I'm not sure about the order or if it's important, but I theorise that getting corrupted by red lyrium is bad for anyone, powerful elven mages included.

I can't wait for DAD (*Dragon Age: Dreadwolf*, affectionate). Hopefully we'll receive enlightenment on the what, why, and how regarding much of the DA world.



# Loyal

## Chapter Notes

Per advice, I'm going to start using "Fereldan" as an adjective or in reference to someone from the nation, "Ferelden." I was also going to delineate "grey" wardens from "normal" wardens by capitalising the former, but looking through my published and unpublished content, fixing this would require a lot of rework to make it clear where I reference the Order or just a plural count of Grey Wardens. Woops. We're just going to roll with treating the Wardens' capitalisation the same as the Qunari's. Thanks for understanding, everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Carver caught Ellana as she lost her footing, while Dorian straightened up with a quirk of his lips.

"You're going to have to do better than that," Dorian taunted.

The three of them were back in the throne room of an uninfected Redcliffe. Gereon fell to his knees at Dorian's seemingly immediate counter of his spell. The magister's last resort had failed.

Ellana stood up and turned to Leliana's agents that had ambushed the venatori in the throne room. "Take him in."

The agents apprehended Gereon while Ellana checked over Dorian and Carver. The latter waved her attention away with trembling hands to see Dorian still preening and standing proudly despite the bloody claw mark on his back. The wounds must have felt like razors in Dorian's skin, but whether smug he had seized victory or pleased he was still the prettiest in the room, Dorian didn't betray his pain. Fiona and her mages began trickling into the throne room in confusion just as Shielders parted the crowd and marched in.

Carver shook away the past hour he had experienced and straightened at attention.

King Cailan strode in with glittering golden armour and removed his helmet to reveal a royal circlet around his head. "Here I expected to forcefully eject Tevinter invaders from Redcliffe Castle."

Fiona and the patriotic Fereldans in the crowd bowed their heads.

“Your Majesty,” Fiona greeted in surprise. “We are no invaders, but victims of servitude.”

Cailan held up a hand. “My uncle has rescued you from my first response to these detestable matters, and for that your debt to him has deepened. Arl Eamon wishes only for me to help him free the rebel mages from Tevinter hands. However, given you and your people’s contribution to the current circumstances, I can’t permit your people’s presence in my lands any longer.”

Fiona lifted her head, agape. “Your Majesty, where will we go?”

Ellana descended from the dais to set her staff down and place a hand over her heart. “Andaran atish’an, King Cailan, it is an honour to meet you. I am Ellana Lavellan, an agent of the Inquisition.”

“The Herald of Andraste,” Cailan recognised. “I’ve heard of — *you!*”

Carver awkwardly coughed.

Cailan gestured. “Anora and Commander Nigel are in a *fit* because of you!”

“Apologies, my king,” Carver replied. “To help restore public order to Ferelden, my squad and I are cooperating with the Inquisition and its allies.”

Cailan stared at him, then sighed. If Carver hadn’t known the king well, he wouldn’t have recognised the small signs of a distracted mind. Carver couldn’t tell if Cailan understood that the faint whispers in the back of his head were signs of the Calling.

Cailan straightened. “Far be it for me to reject the advice of the soldier who discovered the Blight.” He turned to Ellana. “You have the good opinion of one of my most loyal soldiers, Herald of Andraste. The Inquisition’s involvement in Redcliffe shall be dismissed as the welcome, but final remedy to the Tevinter problem.”

Ellana understood. “We will withdraw, Your Majesty – and with the mages’ alliance if they accept.”

Fiona blinked. “We would be honoured to stand by the Inquisition.”

“Gather your belongings and depart immediately,” Cailan declared. “Ferelden’s monarchs will respect our ancient treaties with the late Lady Machen’s line, and recognise that Haven’s land belongs to those

she has granted it to.”

A nominal ownership, given the late Lady Machen’s charity to Divine Justinia for the conclave. However, it was legally feasible all the same. The Inquisition left Redcliffe with rebel mages and captured or killed venatori.

When they returned to Haven, they learned that the scouting mission in Therinfal Redoubt had quickly collapsed into a nightmare. Varric, Sera, and Leliana’s agents had snuck into the fortress and discovered that Templars in upper ranks had been feeding red lyrium to Templars beneath them, until only the rank and file and scattered knight-captains remained untouched by the substance. The scouting party had broken stealth to rescue Knight-Templar Delrin Barris from an infected Knight-Captain Denam’s ambush, sparking a wave of red Templars to sound the alarm and execute the nearest uninfected Templars in a fervent purge.

Leliana’s leading agent, Charter, had managed to raise the fortress gates and allow Thom and the troops to storm in, but the Inquisition’s forces had been overwhelmed. They had urgently evacuated Therinfal Redoubt with only a handful of uninfected Templars: those the Inquisition could grab while fleeing the fortress. A number of brave Templars had stayed behind to buy them time. Thom, Sera, Varric, and Leliana’s agents grew close from the horrifying experience, while tales spread honouring the Inquisition and uninfected Templars’ heroism.

Knight-Templar Delrin Barris credited the red Templars’ change in behaviour to the red lyrium, unable to confirm if Lord Seeker Lucius was an envy demon in disguise. Since improved lyrium with supposedly less side effects was regularly administered to Templars, the Order hadn’t known to reject the new, red lyrium or where it had come from. When Delrin had begun noting the correlation between consumption of red lyrium and his superiors’ incongruous conduct, Delrin had feared spreading sedition and withheld his suspicions from others. Now he regretted it, and worked tirelessly with the Inquisition as an allied Templar.

When Leliana sent agents to track down the red Templars, dead bodies answered her efforts. The bard withdrew her remaining spies from the task and refocused them on more immediate concerns.

While Carver had been escorting Ellana to Redcliffe, some of the Inquisition soldiers issued under him had been captured by Avvar in

the Fallow Mire, a rainy uncharted marsh in southernmost Ferelden. The Hand of Korth, leader of the Unders tribe, had inherited Hargrave Keep after his father Movran the Under had retired to Edvar Hold deeper south in Avvar territory, leaving his son in charge of protecting the main tribe from enemies. Upon learning of a Herald of Andraste, the irrationally haughty Hand of Korth had since issued a challenge to Ellana that they might embody a showdown between their stewards, the Maker and Korth the Mountain-Father. The soldiers that had been captured were composed of one of Carver's lieutenants — Speechless, a Shielder — a sergeant who answered to Speechless, and sixty mixed corporals and foot soldiers who had followed the sergeant to the marshes.

The fact that people under Carver's command had become prisoners of war incensed him. After submitting his report on Redcliffe to Cullen, Carver readily received Cullen's order to escort Ellana to Hargrave Keep in the Fallow Mire.

In charge of monitoring the Mark and its pain in Ellana's hand, Ellana requested Solas' presence, along with Dorian's as a quiet declaration of trust. If the Herald approved of a Tevinter altus in her company, then the Inquisition had no reason to suspect Dorian of duplicity. Ellana carried herself as a Keeper with a chosen First, somewhat isolating Dorian from the Inquisition through her focus and favour of him. It was a quick-witted compromise.

To avoid treating Ellana as a tool to seal rifts, the Inquisition's inner circle had originally been requesting Ellana's opinion at the war table as an exercise of politeness and acknowledging free will. Nowadays, the Inquisition depended on Ellana for her final say. Her word alone caused space to be made for Dorian in Haven. Regardless if she was aware of it, Ellana naturally possessed great influence over the Inquisition.

Contrastingly, Ellana seemed uncertain of this fact once the party of four arrived at the Fallow Mire. The Dalish woman thanked Scout Lace Harding for her directions to Hargrave Keep, and the moment the party moved, Ellana breathed a sigh of relief.

"Tired?" Carver asked.

Dark green eyes blinked, a dimmer shade in the marsh's gloomy atmosphere. "Pardon?"

"Or rejuvenated," Carver amended, determined to ignore the muck

sticking to his boots and cloak. "I suppose one may consider the Fallow Mire a breath of 'fresh' air."

The remark startled a laugh out of her, drawing Solas and Dorian's attention. Ellana's eyes crinkled. "The privacy is somewhat welcome. As are the invigorating views."

Carver spluttered, blushing, while Dorian tittered. "I *knew* you were a woman who could recognise quality!"

"Andraste has blessed my duty with perks," Ellana teased, "surrounded as I am by good-looking people."

Carver turned to the flirtatious Dorian. "Look what you've unleashed."

Solas softly snorted. "Ellana has been playful since the start."

Far from the eyes of the world, the pressure of helping the Inquisition, and from overflowing red lyrium, Ellana resembled more of the free-spirited grown woman she must have truly been, content to explore nature with the small group of people she trusted. Clan Lavellan and the people of Wycome were isolated denizens of their corner of the Free Marches, previously satisfied to ignore each other and the rest of the world. The Mage-Templar War had separated time into something before and after its eruption.

"Though I must ask, Solas," Dorian prodded, "what is *that*?"

The man blinked. "Sorry?"

"Your *outfit* is sorry," Dorian deplored. "What are you supposed to be? A woodsman? Ellana, don't tell me this is a Dalish thing."

The woman responded dryly, "Solas dislikes the Dalish."

"A statement, then," Dorian decided, "for 'apostate hobo.'"

"I'm comfortable," Solas drawled, "though I can't say the same for you. Your attire is ill-suited for a bog."

Dorian tugged on his collar. "I've enchanted my wardrobe with stain and water resistance."

Carver dragged his boots through the marsh. "I don't suppose you can share the wealth?"

"You mean enchant your armour?" Dorian hummed. "Pay me in

gossip.”

Carver shook his head. “I wouldn’t know any.”

“Nonsense,” Dorian immediately accused, peering at Carver’s features. “You’ve been covering the entirety of Ferelden for a long time. You must have been sixteen when you discovered the blight.”

“Seventeen,” Carver corrected, affronted.

“Yet you can perform a smite, which I understand is a southern Templar ability, no?” Dorian waved a hand. “Supposedly, they keep their methods to themselves.”

“Over my years as a soldier, I’ve had many teachers,” Carver deflected. “One of them was a former Templar recruit, turned Grey Warden.”

“And your ability to throw blades like spears,” Dorian continued. “Did a qunari teach you that?”

“Yes.”

“Since I— yes?” Dorian parroted.

Carver snorted. “The look on your face.”

“Oh, I see how it is!” Dorian’s brows raised challengingly.

A gust of wind slanted the rain, slamming the party with an overpowering stench. Carver tripped backwards in bodily disgust. Ellana lit the tip of her staff aflame and held it aloft, revealing the decaying evidence of a recently passed plague ahead of them. Corpses in wagons and a charred heap on the ground suggested that the marshwater hid countless more bodies. With rifts riddling the Fallow Mire, the corpses contributed to the danger of roaming demons as shambling undead.

Ellana swept her staff in front of her, and a curtain of fire drew across the corpses.

The firelight revealed a stone marker for the only path through the Fallow Mire, and on the marker was an iron torch head that lit up with green flames at Ellana’s display of magic, like a magical reaction. The party approached it, recognising more unlit markers dotting the path ahead of them.

Dorian ran a hand through the green flames. Ellana immediately whacked him.

“It has no heat!” Dorian defended. “I recognise it; Tevinter mages discovered this marvel.”

“Veilfire,” Solas smoothly identified. “I’ve heard of this, but never seen it before. It’s a form of sympathetic magic, a memory of flame that burns in this world where the Veil is thin.”

An unnatural screech echoed from the distance.

Carver drew his sword. “Nowadays, that means demons.”

Terror demons, rage demons, and undead flanked the party as the green flames grew stronger, and by the end of the fighting, the stone marker resembled a lighthouse, or a beacon. Ellana peered at a rune etched into the marker, now revealed by the green light.

“It seems that enhanced veilfire dissuades demons from approaching the path,” Ellana interpreted, moving on. “We should light what beacons we find on our way to Hargrave Keep.”

Halfway to the keep, the party encountered one of the towering, big-boned Avvar lugging a warhammer over his shoulder as tall as Ellana. The Avvar caught their approach and awaited them beneath a dormant rift, before introducing himself as Skywatcher Amund and a recent outcast from the Unders tribe. The Hand of Korth was, apparently, a squealing nug.

“Kicked me out once I read the portents to him from the Lady of the Skies,” Amund scoffed. “He can’t be bothered with mending anything. Only thirsts for a good fight — and won’t stop boasting about his skill in it. I’ll rejoice when you cease his squealing.”

Ellana’s brows furrowed. “You want me to win?”

Amund heartily bellowed. “If you’re sent by the Lady of the Skies, you’ll trounce him, easy. The brat’s barely a warrior.”

Ellana opened the dormant rift and tapped her staff on the ground, sprouting a ring of fire mines around the party. The demons that fell from the sky couldn’t resist the close prey and instantly ended up in flames while Ellana was already hurling flashfire at a terror demon. Carver and Amund struck down a passing undead before Solas launched a cluster of their foes into marsh water with a stone fist, and

Dorian raised his staff to the air, emanating electric bolts that branched in the water. The mages fried their enemies in seconds. Ellana sealed the rift, and the green current in the air vanished with a last sputter of energy.

Carver raised a brow at the efficiency.

“We’re in the elements.” Ellana beamed. “Combining spells and nature is like cooking.”

Ellana was reducing the Fallow Mire into a soup.

In a small party and a deserted natural environment, she didn’t have to worry about her spells accidentally catching an ally or bystander. Dorian and Solas evidently felt the same way, given Dorian had manifested his static energy into a passive lightning storm and Solas had summoned a boulder from the Fade that had exploded on impact. Amund interpreted Ellana’s Mark as a sign from his Lady, and followed them to the front steps of Hargrave Keep. Carver, Dorian, Solas, and Amund stood by to witness the Hand of Korth and Ellana confront each other. Carver watched the tribe leader crater the keep with one swing of his hammer and shrug off Ellana’s fire spells.

*Barely a warrior?* What did the Avvar consider as *genuine* strength, then!?

Suddenly, like a mountain goat, Ellana sprung up the Hand of Korth’s hammer when it struck the ground, and darted up her enemy’s body to whip a flaming staff across her enemy’s head. The Hand of Korth stumbled back into a stone wall, cracking it. Ellana rode the momentum to kick off the tall man and roll to her feet on the ground with a tug of her staff. A vermilion circle drew itself under Ellana’s opponent just before a pillar of fire erupted from the Hand of Korth’s feet.

The tribe leader howled, lurching from the damage and dropping his hammer. With a snarl, he commanded tribesmen to ambush Ellana.

Carver drew his sword just as Ellana struck her staff against the cracked wall.

The wall *buried* the Hand of Korth.

A tribesman’s battle cry then demanded Carver’s focus, and he met every strike from an Avvar at the last second, blowing his enemy’s weapon away with redirected energy. Carver had witnessed Sten and



Zevran employ similar techniques before, and had developed a surgical art with Sten's blunt guidance. The qunari in Kirkwall had recognised the touch of a Sten in Carver's bladework. Overhead, spells flew and downed the rest of the tribesmen. When Carver caught his breath, Hargrave Keep was clear of enemies.

Carver fell to his knees and rooted the Avvars' pockets for a key. Upon finding one, Carver hastily ran for the closest door and tested the key down the row of doors, one by one, before finally unlocking the storage room his soldiers were imprisoned in.

Carver shakily exhaled in relief. They were blessedly alive.

Ellana stepped up behind his shoulder and peered in, eliciting bewildered cries.

"The Herald of Andraste came to save us?"

"Of course she did!"

"Thank the Maker, thank the Maker...!"

Carver helped his soldiers rise, dismissing their salutes. They had been locked in a room without light or open ventilation for days, surviving off of the dry food that had fortunately been stored in the room. They couldn't have known that the Inquisition knew where they were.

One of Carver's soldiers — the captured sergeant — leaned on him with silent emotion when he pulled them on their feet.

"You told the Herald about us, Captain?"

"Commander Cullen did," Carver murmured. "I failed you, and for that I deeply apologise. It won't happen again."

"You've seen the size of them Avvar," Speechless weakly chirped from aside. "No amount of training 'n advice from you woulda prepared us for *that*. No offence, ser."

A ripple of laughter followed.

"I should have secured the Fallow Mire alongside you," Carver lamented, earning him a punch to the shoulder from one of the soldiers.

"Watch it, you're hitting a legend," Speechless teasingly warned.

“Quiet,” Carver embarrassedly whispered.

“You came for us,” the sergeant murmured gratefully, “and with the Herald. Don’t kick yourself, Captain. We’re several soldiers out of the hundreds under you, and you can’t hold all our hands. We can stand proud knowing you’ll always have our back.”

After escorting the soldiers back to Scout Lace and her people who would move them back to Haven, Carver found a tree stump and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes with a shuddering breath. He hadn’t allowed himself to process anything since the conclave explosion, and the journey to the future had scraped at old wounds. After being tortured by Solas’ agent, Carver had finally cashed in his owed holidays and taken time off for himself. Nails had checked in on him every week and had only asked questions when Carver had been ready. The commander and a few other people in Denerim were the reason why Carver had been able to leave his long holiday feeling whole again.

Some of said people had perished in the conclave explosion, because Carver had arrogantly thought he could outmanoeuvre Corypheus and enthralled wardens.

In a way, the explosion was his fault.

Carver knew what it meant to lead soldiers, he knew what they all signed up for. He had lost Shielders to the Tower of Ishal, after all. Still, Carver wasn’t ready to lose anyone in his care again.

Ellana eventually found Carver and heel-turned back around the rock outcropping he hid behind, the woman instead distracting Solas with questions about the Fade. When Carver recollected himself and rejoined the party, Ellana was perched on a log with Solas, engrossed in an ancient memory Solas had seen in the Fade. They looked up at Carver’s arrival, before Ellana tossed her voice over her shoulder at Dorian vainly seeking shelter from the rain under a leafless tree.

“Dorian, it’s time to move,” Ellana said.

The altus shivered. His enchantments couldn’t shield his exposed hair and skin from wind and rain. “To a dryer, less smelly place, yes?”

“That will be in the Hinterlands,” Ellana decided, turning to Carver. “While you and Scout Lace discussed recruiting Amund into the Inquisition, Solas, Dorian, and I tracked the veilfire runes down to a nearby apostate’s camp. The apostate attacked us on sight, but we

disposed of her quickly. Near her camp was an ancient elven artefact that measures the Veil.”

“Activating the artefact effectively strengthens the Veil in the immediate area from tears,” Solas shared. “There are several of such artefacts scattered across southern Thedas, but I have seen in the Fade that many must be in the Hinterlands.”

“Solas knows a great deal about these artefacts.” Ellana beamed. “The Hinterlands are just north of here. What say we recruit Amund then finally leave this bog?”

X

The Hinterlands were modestly civilised lands southeast of Redcliffe and far west of Ostagar. Honnleath, the village that Carver had met Shale in, sat on the southern edge of the Hinterlands. As the party followed Solas’ memory-driven dowsing for the artefacts’ locations, they explored more of the quaint, rocky countryside than Carver had seen before. With mage-Templar fighting rooted out of the area, Carver found himself soothed by the sight of simple people finding a way to return to their peaceful lives.

The party encountered a few bandits on the road, which they either drove away from someone’s farm or cornered into submission. Most of the remaining criminals in the rural lands were merely desperate. Ellana intimidated them as a lady herald and ordered they submit to the nearest Inquisition patrol.

Carver noticed her wording. “You mentioned Andraste before, Ellana. Do you believe in the Maker?”

“And the Creators,” Elissa confirmed. “My clan roams near the city-state of Wycome, which prefers to leave us alone so long as we don’t camp near their roads. Many of our members over time have been former city elves who brought Andrastianism with them.”

“How does that work, exactly?” Dorian asked, curious.

“You believe in the Maker,” Ellana pointed out. “You consider the Tevinter and Orlesian chantries as outdated institutions that have forgotten the heart of the Chant, and have instead lost themselves to an obsession with rituals. Yet there must be a higher power, whether or not Andraste was a divine bride or a mortal mage. Recorded history and Chantry practices are inspired by true events, even if we can’t easily see it.”

“Then the question of Andraste is...?” Dorian encouraged.

“To you what the question of the Maker and Creators are to me,” Ellana finished. “I believe the truth of the universe is too wondrous and complex for me to grasp, and that the intricacies of the Maker and the Creators merely give me an idea of what that truth is. I can’t tell what parts of them are real, but I believe *something* about them is. And I deeply love and respect it. Thus when I seek guidance, I pray to the Maker and Mythal.”

“Your patron,” Carver deduced, gesturing to Ellana’s vallaslin.

The woman’s cheeks flushed with joy. “I admire her. Born of the sea, calming Elgar’nan to return the sun to the sky, and creator of the moon, Mythal is the reason why the People have a guiding light every day and night. The watchful, fair-minded mother is someone whom we may only endeavour to embody. When I meet a Dalish who is just and secure in their beliefs, unruffled by the opinions of outsiders, I compare them to Mythal. It is one of the highest honours. I hope to resemble Mythal even a little one day.”

Solas tilted his head at Ellana’s dual faith. “Your reasoning is oddly open-minded.”

“Because most Dalish aren’t,” Ellana intoned.

Solas’ lips thinned. “I did not mean.... Forgive me, at times I forget that I have not lived in a culture deeply rooted in community. I realise now that my suggestions can offend.”

Ellana deflated at Solas’ honourable admittance. “You’ve never offended me, Solas. Just...do not be so quick to dismiss the Dalish as they have in the past with you. Consider that you might have approached them to seemingly declare you knew better than them.”

Solas inclined his head in acknowledgment. “I only meant to offer insight.”

“Perhaps next time, you can warm them up with stories from the Fade.” Ellana’s eyes crinkled, teasing. “You’re exceedingly more tolerable when you talk about what you like.”

Carver looked at him. “Has Ellana asked for your insight on what happened at Redcliffe?”

Solas subtly perked up in interest. “The three of you evidently

travelled to the future, and are completely confident it hadn't merely been an illusion, a trick of the Fade. Fascinating."

Dorian chuckled. "Yet you've swallowed another lemon since, Ser Carver."

Carver blinked, certain he was making no such expression, then belatedly realised that his pause had betrayed him. "I'm simply still processing what happened."

Ellana glanced at him in concern. "What specifically?"

Carver hesitated, cracking under Ellana and Dorian's gazes. "...We were *lucky*, Ellana. The only good people we met in the future consented to our reversing time and possibly erasing a timeline."

Dorian spluttered. "You would have stayed to fix a world consumed by the Breach?"

"Had Leliana, Cassandra, Vivienne, and Solas not chosen to die for our escape?" Carver returned. "Certainly. No one has the moral authority to rearrange reality just because it 'isn't right.' The repercussions would be incalculable, particularly on people's lives. Don't take this the wrong way, Dorian, but I hope not to witness your peak brilliance anytime soon."

Dorian waved a hand. "I've fulfilled my time-travel quota."

Solas shot Carver a dry look when Ellana and Dorian weren't looking. Yet as the party drew close to activating all of the Hinterlands' artefacts, Carver noticed Solas' gaze would sometimes stray in the direction of Redcliffe, then Ellana. Solas' contemplative regard of her seemed to indicate that he was indeed mulling over what she had told him of the event. Carver reviewed what of Ellana's account of Redcliffe might have inspired the thoughtfulness. Her sorrow over the infected members' fates? Her ability to merely flee the situation?

*"The past year might have been the blink of an eye for me, but I'll not waste the months you endured without me in vain."*

Or Ellana's reaction to the year that had passed by without her. She was set on preventing the party's – and the world's – future of suffering. Like a moon in a lake, Ellana's loyalty resembled Solas' commitment to elves. At what point would Solas cease walking a world of Tranquil, and realise he was in the company of real people? Carver didn't know how he would be able to tell.

When they returned to Haven, Vivienne confirmed that Fiona and the mages were ready. It was time for Ellana to seal the Breach.

## Chapter End Notes

When I have more mage companions beyond Solas upon encountering veilfire for the first time, all my mages have something to say about it. Just interesting to note that though rare, it's possible for resourceful and smart mages like your DAI companions to have heard of it before.

It fascinates me that DAI involves a time travel quest if you choose to side with the mages! The quest forces the Herald to see things from Solas' perspective: in a world fallen to ruin, why would you not seize the chance to reverse its fate?

I pity the mages' inherent lack of freedom in Orlesian Andrastian society. I also pity the Templars' forced addiction to lyrium, and their desperate search for stability through their faith and the Order's brotherhood. However while I sympathise with both equally, I usually end up recruiting the mages in DAI just for the time travel quest. My Inquisitor thus later feels conflicted over hypocritically defying Solas' plans. The trickster god becomes a man the Inquisitor can relate with – and for Solavellan Inquisitors, one they consider their other half – which makes opposing him even harder.

Just a bittersweet observation of mine :D

...Of course, it would've still been so interesting for Ellana to visit Therinfal Redoubt, if only so she could outmanoeuvre an envy demon's cunning where Lord Seeker Lucius had "failed." In the eyes of the Inquisition, Templars, and Orlesian nobles, Ellana would've technically passed her Harrowing. The perceived mental fortitude of Dalish mages would've then had an impact on the Dalish's public image, however accurate. Regardless, there are aspects of Templars I wish to explore by removing the Inquisition's chance to completely recruit them >:)

# Brave

## Chapter Notes

So, I got sick :( I've been mostly bedridden and mute like when I had covid, but I already used my free covid tests this year, so I just warned my family to avoid get-togethers. In the midst of the holidays too! Anyway, I usually write content three chapters ahead of the last update, so I only had to fill in scenes for this one. Hopefully I'll be up soon, and if not I have two chapters already in the works.

Thanks for all of your support, and happy New Year's!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Grand Chancellor Roderick Asignon had finally returned from his campaign of denouncing the Inquisition in Val Royeaux. Oddly enough, his presence in Haven wasn't causing the greatest stir.

Since Therinfal Redoubt, Varric had been making small talk with a young man seemingly in his early twenties, a scrawny but agile blonde who had directed the scouting party through the fortress and swiftly unlocked doors in their way. Since the bulk of the Inquisition's forces had accompanied Ellana to Redcliffe, Varric knew that he and the others in Therinfal Redoubt would have never been able to escape without "Cole's" help. When Leliana caught wind of this, she questioned what a young man would have been doing among Templars in a stronghold. Cassandra interpreted Cole's forgetful presence as hedge magic, to which Vivienne stressed the risk of possession. Cassandra and Vivienne debated if Haven could tolerate the danger Cole posed.

When Ellana's party entered the Chantry, they found Cassandra, Vivienne, and Varric arguing over Cole's presence.

"He's a boy!" Varric defended.

"He is not a pet," Vivienne sharply warned, "nor is he trained to resist demons."

Cassandra turned to the party as they entered the Chantry. "Ellana. The recruited mages will channel their magic into *you* as you seal the Breach. The rift in the sky already raises the possibility of possession. How do you feel about the presence of a hedge mage?"

"I want to help," Cole babbled softly. "I won't be in the way. Tiny, no trouble, no notice taken unless – Ellana. You're trying to heal the holes. That's your name. Unless Ellana wants me to."

Varric gestured, as if it was clear. "See?"

Solas frowned down at the blonde tracing a brick on the floor with his finger. "Cole might be able to cause people to forget him, or even fail entirely to notice him, but these are not the abilities of a mage. It seems Cole is a spirit."

Cassandra and Vivienne exhaled twin noises of disgust. "An abomination!"

"He has possessed nothing and no one," Solas determined.

"A demon, then," Dorian amended.

"If you prefer," Solas replied, "although the truth is somewhat more complex. Cole appears human in all respects – a unique existence. If he wants to help, I suggest we allow him to do so."

Ellana's lips twisted. "I'm not sure how much more complexity I want around me before I try sealing the Breach."

Cassandra's hand drifted to her sword grip. "As you say."

Carver cleared his throat. "I agree with Solas."

The man whipped his gaze to Carver, quietly stunned.

"You do?" Ellana gaped in surprise. "Considering your training, I would think.... What if I ordered Cassandra to dispose of Cole?"

"Then I would intervene," Carver frankly replied.

The air charged with tension.

Dorian's brows danced. "Ooo, *drama*."

Ellana's composure cracked. "*You* would fight *Cassandra* in defence of a *demon*?"

"A spirit," Carver corrected. Now Solas was definitely staring. "If you wish, then request Leliana to have her agents watch him, but I don't believe Cole is malevolent. Therinfal Redoubt proved a nightmare. If Cole were a demon, would he have interfered and saved people's



lives?"

Ellana hesitated. "What if I — fail," her voice caught, "at sealing the Breach, and the energy drives him mad?"

"I hope you'll kill me," Cole stated, startling everyone. He peered up from where he sat crouched on the ground, and stilled upon meeting Carver's eyes. "Lost. Lonely blue, then bright, a babe no longer. You aren't him. You're the friend."

Amazement lanced through Carver's chest.

Could it be? The same Compassion that had introduced the real Carver to the gentle corner of the Fade since Carver had been a child? Yet Cole's immediate cradling of his head suggested that the spirit was suffering from mild amnesia. He behaved convinced that his form lacked inspiration, even though Carver knew that Compassion had crossed the Veil and taken the form of the original Cole who had passed away. Forever young. At the same time, Cole recognised Carver's appearance because the real Carver had been taking similar forms for as long as the original Hawke could remember. Perhaps Cole was unconsciously blocking his memories of the original Cole in a manner of selective amnesia? Carver's lightning-quick thought dissipated with Cole's continued muttering.

"I refuse to be like *them*," Cole flinched, living from one emotion to the next. "If I turn into a demon, you *must* kill me, please."

Eyes darted between Cole, Carver, and Cassandra, before eventually landing on Ellana. The situation rested in her hands.

A taut silence preceded her nod. "I'll ask Leliana to have Cole monitored. Cassandra, let's meet with her, Cullen, and Josephine in the war room. I'm ready to seal the Breach."

The group dispersed, Carver hastily retreating for his shared room. The crunch of snow behind him drew his gaze to Solas heading the same direction, likely for his own cabin split between the sage, Researcher Minaeve, and Apothecarist Adan. Solas met Carver's gaze, and the latter quickly returned his focus ahead. They walked in silence.

A heel-turn. "Are you following me?"

Solas slowly blinked. "My cabin is that way."

“Right.” Carver shed his paranoia and continued walking.

“That was brave of you.”

Carver halted, facing him. “What?”

“Standing up to Cassandra,” Solas elaborated, holding his hands behind his back.

Carver purposefully misunderstood with a snort. “Cassandra *can* be intimidating.”

Solas watched him. “You would have died protecting a spirit.”

“An innocent.” Carver’s brows furrowed. “I thought you knew or have deduced everything about me. Besides, Cassandra and I would have yielded at the first nearest maiming, and Ellana would have stopped us before then.”

Solas’ gaze slanted aside to the muddy snow of Haven.

Carver left him there.

The Inquisition’s army needed to spread out in Haven and stand ready for any situation that could arise while Ellana tried to seal the Breach. Carver coordinated with Maker’s Breath and Xanthe per Cullen’s instructions, a task that consumed his energies for the rest of the week. When Carver finally found a moment to breathe, he sought overgrown land behind a furrier workshop for privacy. The corner of Haven was unpopular due to the workshop’s odour and the area’s acoustics that overwhelmed it with an ambient clamour. Carver rounded the workshop, only to swiftly reverse and press his back against the building.

Ellana and Solas were seated on a boulder, the sage cradling Ellana’s glowing palm in his.

“You told me so, do you not remember?” Ellana’s melodic voice faintly drifted through the air. “Spirits are like people, defined beyond their appearances.”

“I remember,” Solas quietly replied. “Your decision about Cole nonetheless surprised me.”

“I shouldn’t have hesitated,” Ellana lamented. “So far as we know, Cole has only aided us, and yet I nearly judged him for what he can’t

control. I would have wanted someone to believe in me when I had woken up in a jail cell with a foreign mark on my hand. And yet....”

“You find the Breach daunting,” Solas intoned.

“A decision made in fear would have condemned Cole,” Ellana spoke roughly.

Solas made a noise in the back of his throat. “In my studies of the Fade, I have seen few others regret their *delayed* response to aiding a spirit. Most would not consider it an option at all. To them, spirits are a mystery or a tool the world would ill venture to understand.”

“Your words are kind, but goodness alone doesn’t drive me.” Ellana’s voice fell. “Obviously. Look at how I hesitated. The truth is I’m terrified of failing. Everyone’s behaving as if Thedas’ problems will vanish once the Breach disappears. What if my interaction with the Breach merely incites another explosion?”

“I posit that the Breach is merely a result of the explosion,” Solas shared, “not a contributor. One cannot blame glass for the fire that birthed it. The worst that may happen is your Mark tears the Breach open wider.”

Ellana shakily sighed. “Somehow, that’s comforting.” A rosy laugh. “Since we’ve met, you’ve been reassuring me with wisdom and delighting me with your stories of the Fade. Even now, you’re willing to follow me into a bog just to continue monitoring my Mark and easing the pain. I would not be able to move confidently without you. Ma serannas, Solas. I don’t deserve your faithful companionship.”

Solas’ voice subtly strained, imperceptible. “...The Mark appears stable.” The rustle of fabric, indicating a release of Ellana’s hand. “And you credit me too much, Ellana. I humbly accept your gratitude.”

A phantom arrow of guilt struck Carver despite not sitting on the boulder himself. He took it as a cue to silently leave the pair to their privacy.

When Carver next saw Solas, the man and Thom were by the haystacks for Denmet’s mounts. The stables sat near the first of several trebuchets that guarded Haven, while another ring of trebuchets stood within Haven’s walls. Carver had recently inspected them with Speechless, now on his way to examine the others. The rest of Carver’s soldiers were scattered across Ferelden to monitor rifts for Ellana to seal, and to report demonic activity, so only a minimal company of

Carver's soldiers remained in Haven. As he neared the stables, he observed that Thom must have caught Solas in conversation as the mage sighed.

"Sera's involved?" Solas checked. "So this question will be offensive."

"Yes, probably." Thom coughed. "Sorry. See, you make friends with spirits in the Fade, so...are any more than just friends? If you know what I mean."

"Oh, for...*really*?"

"It's a natural thing to be curious about!" Thom defended.

"For a twelve-year-old!"

"It's a *simple* yes or no question."

Solas shook his head. "Nothing about the Fade or spirits is simple, especially not that."

Thom lit up. "Aha! So you *do* have experience in these matters!"

A snort leapt out of Carver's throat as he passed.

Solas shot him a look and remarked crisply, "I did not say that."

"Don't panic," Thom jovially chuckled. "It'll be our little secret."

"...Ass."

"Now who's twelve?" Thom barked, laughing, before noticing Carver. "Ser."

"You're under Captain Xanthe, right?" Carver idled. "What's your rank?"

Thom nodded. "She's well up there, but yes ser, I'm one of her sergeants."

"Notify me when you would like to be a lieutenant." Carver's lips twitched. "No one else has managed to provoke profanity out of Solas."

"I did *not*—" Solas interjected.

Carver left him in the snow again.

X

Ellana successfully sealed the Breach, subduing the swirling lake of green fire in the sky into harmless ribbons, like an aurora.

It was beautiful.

Haven danced in joy and relief.

X

Carver stood at attention by Haven's gates while festivities lit the village behind him. Maker's Breath's soldiers covered Orlais the way Carver's did Ferelden, while Xanthe managed Haven. On this occasion per Carver's advice, she had maintained fully-attentive security around Haven as before the Breach's sealing, but Carver couldn't help contributing his own pair of eyes to the night's watch. Varric eventually found him in the drifting snow with a steaming bowl of venison stew in the dwarf's hands.

"Hey Shiny," Varric chided, "you're missing out on the food. The same as usual, but it tastes better with our recent victory."

Behind the merchant prince followed Sera and Thom, the former who quirked a brow. "Yer one ovem big armours."

"A captain," Carver replied.

Sera shrugged. "Tha's what ah said."

Thom chuckled teasingly. "Standing guard, soldier?"

"Sergeant," Carver greeted. "The three of you were brave at Therinfal Redoubt, from what I've heard. The Templar Order is responsible for many wrongs, but no man or woman deserves such a fate. I'm glad you and a couple Templars managed to escape that place."

"Aye," Thom deflated a degree. "This conflict hurts everyone."

Sera burped. "Yer dunna support mages or Templars, Thom?"

Varric snorted. "I think none of us here do."

As the three warmly jested between each other, Carver observed Thom's jaw hidden by a growing beard. Possibly a tribute to the warden's fallen mentor. It was nowhere bottomless enough to conceal bread rolls like Sera's rugged layers, from which she would ferally tear

into her goods while Varric occasionally spooned his bowl of soup. Above Thom's dark beard, weary cheekbones eventually peaked with a squint.

"Firelight...?" the warden trailed off.

Carver whipped his head in the direction of Thom's gaze, spotting flickering motes of light descending the mountains facing Haven.

"Sound the alarm."

A bemused shape of Thom's beard answered Carver's command. "It could be anything."

"Do it, sergeant."

Carver descended from the gates and pivoted to Haven's outer ring of trebuchets. He found Harritt, his smiths, and a few soldiers lounging on a trebuchet with mugs of hot cider in their hands. One of the soldiers recognised Carver's armour, its colours and fit similar to the other two Shielders in the Inquisition's ranks. Everyone in the Inquisition was a volunteer and either wore armour they previously had, or armour hurriedly fashioned by Harritt and his smiths. Whoever Carver was, he held a high position.

The soldier blinked slowly, caught between his buzz and surprise. "Ser?"

"Wind up the trebuchets," Carver ordered. "We're under attack."

The soldier straightened up. "Demons, ser?"

Carver turned to peer at the torches in the distance, already spilling closer to Haven. The echoing stamp of feet drifted up from the valley between Haven and the opposite mountain like a war drum. The enemy could be red Templars or the Venatori. The distinction hardly mattered.

The soldiers stared agape. "R-Ready the trebuchets!"

Harritt, his smiths, and the soldiers leapt to action, spreading the word and arming Haven's trebuchets. Carver hastened further away from Haven's walls and found the borders of Horsemaster Denet's stables. Unhinged red Templar horrors had already run ahead of their troops to attack. Denet and his stableboys were desperately freeing the horses, harts, dracolisks, and war nugs from the stables while Roderick

vainly swung a shovel around at the invaders. A red horror knocked the tool aside, and Roderick lost his footing, tripping backwards.

Carver dismembered the red horror just as it thrust a lyrium claw at Roderick. Another flick of Summer Sword, and the horror collapsed, headless. Carver grabbed Roderick's arm and hauled him up.

"That was brave and foolish," Carver scolded, turning to the others. "Run to the Chantry, all of you – and bring the horses!"

The terrified horsemaster and stableboys frantically nodded and fled, but Carver gripped Roderick's arm tightly. "A secret exit from Haven's Chantry. Do you know of any?"

"A secret...?" The chancellor straightened, exhaling shakily. "Maker willing, I'll guide everyone through it."

Carver and Roderick together ran for Haven's gates, before Carver split off to prepare Haven's inner ring of trebuchets.

Ellana grabbed his arm as he passed by. "What's going on?"

Cullen panted behind her from running around Haven. "We're under attack!"

Josephine caught up with them. "What colours are they flying?"

Carver pivoted for the trebuchets. "None!" he tossed back.

Josephine's squawk followed him, contributing to the air of emergency that was rapidly consuming Haven. Mugs, tables, and tents toppled to the ground as everyone hurriedly fled to the Chantry or addressed the invasion. Dennet's herd of mounts crowded the Chantry's main doors as Thom and Dennet calmly led the animals through. Carver caught Adan and Minaeve nearby struggling to move massive earthen jugs.

"Leave it!" Carver ordered.

The two scientists swiftly moved on to cradle as many smaller jugs from their workspaces as they could, before fleeing to the Chantry. The heavy thudding of active trebuchets shook the air around Haven. Carver found Xanthe coordinating the inner ring of trebuchets.

"Carver!" the woman recognised between shouting orders. "The northern-most trebuchet isn't firing!"

“I’m on it,” Carver dismissed her help and hustled to the north.

Red Templars breached Haven’s walls as the outer ring of trebuchets slowly quieted. Carver cut down a red marksman and ran behind a red knight for protection from a horror’s volley of lyrium spikes, before stabbing both. He winced at spirit damage he suffered from the horror’s reflexive barriers. The technique resembled mages’ shields, except the area of effect had to have also harmed the horror with spirit damage. The red Templars were willing to hurt themselves just to hurt an enemy. Carver finished off a red shadow with a wrath of heaven, before the ground quaked.

Ellana, Cassandra, the Iron Bull, and Solas were fending off a red behemoth from the jammed trebuchet.

The behemoth axed its monstrous lyrium fist down again, cracking the ground as Cassandra and Bull rolled aside. Ellana and Solas launched fire and boulders at the behemoth’s head, but their sweat was visible from afar. Their mana reserves had limits.

Carver ran in. “Fire that trebuchet!”

Ellana and Solas switched out with him and hurriedly wound the trebuchet back, before rolling ammunition into it. The behemoth fell just as the ground suddenly fissured from a distantly enormous fireball. Carver’s hair rose at a familiar high-pitched, reptilian trumpet of war.

**SHRIIEEEEK—**

**BOOM!**

The air split with raw power, tossing Carver like a rag doll. Bull’s body slammed into him with the explosion. Gravity spun. Carver barely heard Ellana’s cry to retreat.

“*Dragon!*” Cassandra roared, hauling Bull off of Carver and supporting the qunari as they fled.

The brace around Bull’s bad ankle had shattered. Carver dazedly picked himself up and charged after their figures, which were already vanishing into the tossed up snow. As if the dragon had brought it, a storm had picked up, rapidly climaxing into a blizzard. At the Chantry’s steps, Carver turned to see Solas’ blurry grey figure chasing after his shadow with equal hurry, before Carver realised that Ellana wasn’t with them. Solas followed his gaze to the wall of flames that



had consumed all sight of the jammed trebuchet. The mage's posture stilled.

Carver bolted past Solas.

"*Carver!*" a shocked exclamation followed the action.

He didn't glance over his shoulder, sprinting for the trebuchet. Never had the small village of Haven stretched impossibly far as it did now. Every laboured breath left Carver with a sting.

—*THUD*.

The trebuchet launched ammunition into the mountain across Haven, and in a blink, an avalanche was already hurtling through the valley for Haven's gates. Carver stabbed Summer Sword into the ground and crouched down with both hands before a tidal wave of ice and rock crashed over him.

...

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A mountain, this time.

Carver was moving up past towers and temples now.

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...

In truth, merely the wane of the avalanche's crash had swallowed Carver, like the last frothy fingers of seawater curling up against a cliffside for the sky. Ellana had been in the *heart* of nature's wrath. The fact grew devastatingly clear as Carver clawed his way to the surface past splintered wood and packed, rocky snow. His helmet had become a bowl of debris that he promptly emptied by lifting his visor and bending over, but his frozen fingers refused to relatch the visor shut afterwards. Despite the exhaustion and shock scooping the strength out of him by the minute, Carver condensed the world into an apple in his hand, flaring his surroundings with white fire. A misshapen sea of velvet grey had consumed Haven and the valley that had divided it from other mountain faces, as if the valley's former

existence had been an illusion. Carver couldn't even seek direction from the skies, draped as they were with low-hanging clouds.

Where would he find Ellana in all *this*?

On a normal day, the Mark softly rippled from the woman's hand like a green mirage. Near a rift, it could briefly blind the unsuspecting with a burst of energy. At night with misleading silhouettes of trees, rocks, and falling snow between Ellana and the nearest living being? Carver could just as well search for a candle in a storm.

"*Ellana...!*" Carver faintly howled.

Remorse panged through him every time he propped himself up on debris with Summer Sword. He would need to carefully inspect his blade later. He had to believe in a later, else his will would collapse under the weight of more than a mountain.

"*E...lla...na...!*"

Carver climbed higher, hoping to gain a broader angle of the devastation. His foot slipped on ground Summer Sword hadn't tested, and Carver tripped, tumbling down backwards, then on his side, until his head finally ceased spinning and throbbing. He picked himself up between shapes he at first mistook for horses or people, but quickly proved to simply be more trees and rocks. The shattered hope cut deep into Carver's steadfastness. Then colour distantly flared amongst the grey, before Carver found his feet flying for a crevice between two juts of rock that contributed to a mountain peak.

Air rushed in and out of Carver's lungs like razors as he skittered down to Ellana's trembling form. The woman shakily looked up from her fawn-like legs at the incoming grey shape moving to swallow her. Carver tugged his cloak free of his shoulders and tossed it around Ellana, a fresh bite of icy wind slamming into his body. He ignored it.

Their teeth chattered.

"C-C-C...."

"S-Save your energ-gy." Carver hugged her tightly with one arm, serving as Ellana's own walking stick as he tested the ground ahead of them one leg and arm at a time. "Y-Your mark is a b-beacon...sh-show it."

Ellana clutched his cloak around her and peeked her left hand out, her

hair whipping the limb and both of their faces. The attempt was unlikely to grab attention, if the two of them were even within sight of anyone. “W-Where are w-we going?”

“N-No idea,” Carver confessed. He was focused on shielding Ellana from certain death, and little else. “I-I go where y-you go.”

Despite their bleak situation, despite suffering a change in the Frostbacks’ skyline, Ellana....

Carver blinked rapidly.

Ellana *laughed*.

“My f-faithful knight.”

The music filled the cavities in Carver’s spirit that the past several events had cut out of him. Carver’s stiff face weakly cracked into a smile. Then Ellana slumped against him.

“E-Ellana...?”

Carver’s heart leapt into his throat as the woman became a wordless sack of rocks in his arms. Maker, she was out *cold*. Carver scooped her up – Keeper armour, cloak, and all – and trudged through the snow more hurriedly, nearly falling over on his face more times than he could care to count. Frustration burned through the ice building in his veins. Where he previously couldn’t carry his own weight, he would lift Ellana above waist-high snow and debris for hours if he had to. As energy from his frustration dwindled, it certainly felt like it.

He didn’t know if he was carrying a corpse.

Finally, Carver couldn’t right himself in time from poor footing, and he tripped, falling forwards into Ellana. Her marked hand tumbled out as they fell, arm landing stretched out on the snow. Carver couldn’t tell if he had imagined firelight over a crest of snowy rock ahead of them. Eventually, he realised he also wasn’t imagining voices.

“It’s the Herald!”

Firm hands picked him and Ellana up from the ground, shaking snow off of them. Ellana was swiftly carried to the heart of crowded tents and campfires while two burly people slung Carver’s arms over their shoulders and dragged him between them. They deposited Carver into a cot where Chantry sisters immediately tended to his armour and

wounds, and as the warmth of a campfire bled into Carver's sore body, his eyes slid closed.

Cole's voice faintly trickled into his ears. Bony fingers tapped on the side of Carver's neck where a blade had once kissed him. "You don't want to die, despite the pain. Very well...I won't help you, friend of Carver."

## Chapter End Notes

Solas' reaction to Carver and Cassandra's "almost fight" gives me the same energy as the quest where Cole either becomes more spirit or human:

**Solas:** We *cannot* let Cole kill that man.

**Varric:** I don't think anyone was going to suggest that, Chuckles.

While Solas can read people well, his beliefs sometimes dive into the driver's seat, commanding his first reaction.

Also, given that Cole can see into dwarves' emotions like Varric and a dwarven Herald, I've allowed Carver to likewise be exposed to him. Cole doesn't appear to be a straight-up mind reader unlike in other stories I've seen, but rather somewhat of an empath who is sensitive to "loud" emotions and who can quote heavy memories. I'll be writing Cole as such.

As for Sera's Derbyshire accent, I tried to write it more naturally than I heard it in-game, according to the voice actress' intention. She's a fun little rogue :D

# Big Armour

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for the well wishes everyone! I finally took a test and tested negative for covid, so I'm probably just down with a terrible cold or something. I've been eating solids now, which means I can finally eat the chicken in my "boiled ginger, rice, and chicken – the ultimate get well soon! – soup." I can also finally breathe while sleeping. Maybe I should start drinking two litres of water a day? Being sick sucks :(

Everyone watch your health and stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The inner council was heatedly debating the Inquisition's future at the front of camp.

The term applied loosely. Every person and domesticated animal that had managed to escape Haven in time was crowding a gap between mountain peaks, so that haphazardly-erected tents and burning piles of broken wheels and carts ran through the Frostbacks in a brown river. Irreparable wooden devices fueled the Inquisition's fires. At the river's farthest point from Haven, where the inner circle led the survivors' daily march to nowhere, Ellana's medical tent stood before her advisors and close allies, including Carver's own bivouac opened to a bonfire. The council's mounting argument and the surrounding people's restlessness afforded Carver some semblance of privacy, filling the night air as they were with directionless words. No one but the healer tending Carver's wounds noticed him awaken.

"Solas...?"

Carver sat up, wincing, and unlike last time, pain didn't sweep the rug out from under him. Across the fire, Ellana and Mother Giselle were huddled together in the former's tent, lost in a discussion with eyes wandering to the nearby council's discussion and pacing. Seated beside Carver, Solas merely watched Carver struggle sitting up on his cot. When Carver swivelled his head at their surroundings and looked to Solas for enlightenment, the mage wordlessly returned his hands to a gash in Carver's thigh and applied a magical glow to it.

"It doesn't hurt," Carver blearily remarked, straightening. "Maker,

how many drugs am I hopped up on?”

He belatedly realised the phrasing might not belong in Thedas. Still, Solas wasn't even looking at Carver's face. The mage could have been pretending that he couldn't hear Carver or see his body language.

“Solas,” Carver addressed again. He waved a hand in front of the man's face, answered with a brief lean away from the offending appendage before Solas resumed healing Carver's wound. Carver spluttered. “Silent treatment? Really? Are we suddenly feeling young today?”

Solas met Carver's eyes with a cutting gaze. “Do *not* play the dunce around me. You know very well as I do the similarities we share.”

“And differences,” Carver returned, pain taking a backseat. “You know you need Ellana, yet you were lamenting her loss while she was *still* alive. I'm appalled. If we're speaking bluntly, I mean.”

Solas wasn't looking at Ellana's tent. He wasn't even facing her direction.

The hidden god's voice left him tersely. “You're averse to my mission, so——” A snap of the campfire interrupted. “Why did you thoughtlessly throw your life away?”

Carver's temper splintered with a heated whisper. “Thoughtless—!? Ellana was going to die!”

“I can work around her death, and you——”

“Even if I *would* be able to work around her death, it doesn't mean I *want* to!” Carver lowered his voice further. “Honestly, Solas, why isn't your intelligence talking? Our best path towards Corypheus's defeat is through Ellana, and you know it. Maker, we *agreed* on this fact! We wouldn't even *be* here if you had shared Skyhold's location like I had insisted!”

Carver's words seemed to physically strike Solas, and the mage's ire suddenly cooled to a simmer in his gaze. Solas retreated his hands.

“You can walk on that.”

The man retreated out of the bivouac.

Prick.

Mother Giselle roamed out of Ellana's tent, slowly raising her voice in a hymn. As *The Dawn Will Come* picked up across the Frostbacks, Carver watched every knee lower and head bow before Ellana's tent, even if not everyone could see the woman from their angle.

*Bare your blade*

*And raise it high*

*Stand your ground*

*The dawn will come....*

While the hymn still echoed through the mountains, Carver saw Solas draw Ellana's attention, pulling her aside to a private stretch of snow away from camp. The Inquisition was already stirring into motion, reinvigorated into helping each other not only move away from where Corypheus and his dragon might find them, but also seek a new place to call the Inquisition's home. Come dawn, everyone would be packed up and ready to move at Ellana's will.

Ellana had faced one of the Magisters Sidereal and his archdemon. She had dropped a mountain on both her enemy and herself, and walked away from it.

She could determine what part of a mountain range would be safe to settle down in, Maker willing.

Carver couldn't imagine the insurmountable pressure on Ellana's shoulders, though he inwardly still smarted at Solas' comment. Carver opposed Solas' end goal, certainly, but it wasn't as if Carver would place Ellana and the immediate future beneath validating Solas' pride. If the Dread Wolf so delighted in all but one person deciphering and vainly countering his plans, then he could wait another two years and deal with the *Qunari*. Right now, Carver had a mission.

When dawn broke, the brown river trudged behind Ellana on an untested path that lasted for days. Guided by Solas' direction to a forgotten fortress, Ellana's confidence like a needle to the North and her rewarded faith seemed literally miraculous. Carver felt the Inquisition's rippling gasp at the crest of a ridge where a towering stronghold and network of bridges could finally be spotted in the misty distance.

The parade around Carver slowed as the marvellous sight sank in.

“What is that?”

To Carver's left was a young man in neutral brown leathers and armour. A mercenary, or at least no one sworn to the Inquisition. Like Carver, his breath painted the air with white moisture.

A shrug answered him. “A fortress that has changed hands so many times, its origins are forgotten.”

The stranger glanced at Carver. “How do you know that?”

Carver slowly continued walking, not meeting the young man's gaze. “You can ask the resident Fade expert.”

Traffic filtered around the stranger, reminding him to move along. “Still, for the Herald to navigate off of dreams and a prayer.... The lady's something.” He noted Carver's bandaged thigh and his bulk of things with a nod. “Need help with any of that?”

Dorian came up behind them with a snort. “Carver would sooner carry *you* than have someone carry his things for him.”

A blink followed the remark. “*You're* the one who saved the Herald...?”

“Altus.” Carver's lips twitched at Dorian, evading the comment.

A startled tilt of the stranger's head reacted to his address. “And you're familiar with Tevinter customs?”

“...Not at all, I've just hung around this one long enough.” Carver scanned the young man properly, searching his armour for a signifier. An undercut hairstyle and awareness of Tevinter terms. Crem?

Dorian's playful voice interrupted his thoughts. “Not *nearly* long enough. You mustn't know how much I wept for you and Ellana thinking you two were lost, before you returned.”

“It's a shame Ellana and I missed that.” Carver smothered a laugh. “We have a bet on if you're a pretty crier or not.”

The mage sniffed. “Let the mystery stand solved that I am aesthetically pleasing in all things.”

A hulking figure suddenly lumbered past the three of them, considering their slowed pace. “Watch yourself, it's always the pretty ones.”



Dorian wrinkled his nose and hastily sped up. “Bull, do you ever *bathe*?”

The qunari placidly glanced back at them, his horns skipping over the sun. “What, here?”

“Around civilised people, yes,” Dorian retorted.

Bull snorted. “Well I fear I’m all out of rose petals, princess.”

Carver likewise picked up the pace, glancing between Dorian, Bull, and the Chargers scattered around and behind the group, all mostly distracted by the sight of Skyhold. “Have you two been doing this the entire journey?”

Dorian and Bull unknowingly quirked a brow at Carver in unison. Flatly. “What gives you that idea?”

A hum answered them. “The easy banter?”

Dorian fluttered a hand that found its way to Carver’s shoulder in theatrical concern. “We’re exchanging *insults*, dear knight – I with my words, him with his presence.”

“*Vint*.”

“*Qunari*.”

Carver glanced between them. “I uh, think he’s a Tal-Vashoth.”

Dorian turned a glittering gaze on Carver, suddenly all mad scientist. “You *think*, or you’re trying to cover up for him? Ellana’s already told me everything.” How could Carver forget he was surrounded by *frustratingly observant people*?

Bull spluttered, surprise angling itself from the tips of his horns to the points of his boots. “She *has*?”

“She trusts me!” Dorian’s other hand briefly conducted a symphony in the air that ended on his chest. “What can I say, the woman has good taste.”

Bull turned a sharp grey eye on Carver. “*You* know as well.”

It wasn’t a question.

Carver’s pulse and feet sped up. “I’m not answering that.”

Dorian tittered behind him. “That means yes!”

Dorian had probably won the only surprise over Bull he ever would. Within a minute of observing Carver in conversation, Bull had been perceptive enough to grasp Carver’s baseline body language, *then* read that Carver knew he was a Ben-Hassrath through a handful of words. Only the fact that Ellana trusted a Tevinter with Bull’s true profession could thoroughly surprise the spy. Beyond the specific situation, Carver doubted anything else would easily blindside Bull. No pun intended.

A harried gait brought Carver to the spearhead of the migration, where Ellana moved on interpretations of Solas’ dreams. The fact was perfectly fantastical, buoying the Inquisition’s spirits if not passionately lighting the faithful’s hearts aflame. Past the council’s figures and the equivalent of their pack mules at the front of the line, Ellana and Solas could be faintly seen walking closely together, one slightly after the other. Carver watched Solas’ gaze continuously stray towards Ellana — her careful footing, her face as she inquisitively chatted with him, her subtle body language.

Her hair when it danced in the wind.

Solas beheld Ellana like the answer to a great mystery was hidden in her somewhere. The longer the answer escaped him, the deeper his curiosity hooked in. Like Solas, Carver knew that if worse came to worst, they could find a way to defy Corypheus even without Ellana — yet Carver also didn’t hide the fact that he *believed* in her, beyond her merely possessing the Mark.

What was it about Ellana that inspired others to *hope*?

How could someone predictable and easy to understand still surprise Solas, as with the subject of spirits?

Carver could see such questions fuelling Solas’ singular focus. In comparison, Ellana continued to determinedly trek closer to Skyhold, ignorant of Solas’ internal perplexity.

X

“Commander, will they follow?”

“Inquisition, will you follow?”

Cheers echoed throughout Skyhold’s courtyard.

“Will you fight? *Will we triumph?*”

The rippling hurrah swelled into a roar of approval.

“Your leader!” Cullen drew his sword and pointed it to the top of a perron staircase. “Your Herald! *Your Inquisitor!*”

Goosebumps erupted across Carver’s skin as the mass of soldiers, scouts, and survivors around him leapt up with inspired fervour, fists pumping into the sky — Josephine included, to her brief fluster. Carver could barely hear the blood rushing in his ears. Someone somewhere had started chanting “*Inquisitor!*” and over the din of excitement, Carver distantly noted that the chant was spreading. Finally, a film of clouds withdrew from the sun overhead, drawing a golden curtain of light over Ellana’s distant figure just as she met everyone’s promise with a raise of her ceremonial sword to the sky.

The roars grew deafening.

Contrastingly, Carver found his breath taken away. The moment seemingly stretched in his eyes, Ellana’s gallant posture as radiant and steadfast as the truth she wielded: the dawn would come. She was beautiful. The thought didn’t come to Carver in a romantic tone, but in a celebration of her visible willpower and belief in all things good. It didn’t matter if she was privately unconfident in herself; for her in that moment, the cause was greater. Carver had seen such beauty only once before, in a statue that had stood at the top of a dais, stunning even under scant rays of filtered sunlight.

With sudden realisation, Carver recognised that he was literally watching history in the making.

Ellana was going to live forever in the annals of faith.

As the cheers echoed throughout the courtyard, Carver acknowledged the green banners fluttering around them, displaying the Inquisition’s eye and sword for all to see. Xanthe’s soldiers had suffered heavy losses in exchange for the rest of Haven’s survival — including the safe extraction of Denmet’s mounts — so when the Inquisition had finally reached Skyhold, it was a veritable village with functionality yet little to no fighting power that had at first camped at the fortress’ feet. Dwarven connections had then found stonemasons to verify the architecture’s stability, quickly followed by the relocation of critical workers into Skyhold while master masons simultaneously restored the stronghold one vital bridge and floor at a time. Now, Skyhold was habitable enough to welcome those camped beyond the fortress walls

in to witness the promotion of an inquisitor. They especially needed people to guard the fortress's battlements and keep an eye on the sky for tainted dragons.

Josephine had ensured the venue was ready. The sight of Skyhold's restored grand interior boosted the crowd's morale, especially Xanthe's, Thom's, and Xanthe's remaining soldiers' in the face of proof that their sacrifices had brought everyone to this point. It also helped that Carver's rescue of Ellana had elevated the Inquisition's overall respect for him; when they heard the news, his soldiers took deep pride serving under his command, beginning to understand the faith that other Inquisition soldiers from the king's army had for the capable captain of Maric's Shield. Rumours were starting to spread about Carver — in no small part thanks to Speechless — but Ellana's promotion as Inquisitor would hopefully eclipse any interest in Carver's background. This moment, more than any, would burn strongly in people's memories.

Carver slipped away as Cullen, Josephine, and Leliana eventually dismissed everyone back to their posts, and Ellana retreated into Skyhold's main castle with Cassandra shadowing her right. Inquisition soldiers clad in green filtered around Carver, invigorated. He nearly missed Cullen moving with the crowd and tapping his shoulder.

"Commander," Carver acknowledged.

Cullen gestured to a staircase, and the two of them climbed it for the battlements. "When you were in Kirkwall, did you encounter a Templar named Raleigh Samson?"

Carver hummed. "I didn't realise he was still a Templar."

"He was reinstated after you left."

Cullen opened the door to his office. Candlelight replaced the sun, save for where warm rays streamed through thin, rectangular windows near the ceiling. The smell of straw from a loft above betrayed where Cullen slept most nights, if any. The stress of the job alone wasn't responsible for Cullen's faint eyebags. Carver stood at ease before Cullen's desk while the commander rummaged through stacks of papers.

"After I followed Cassandra out of Kirkwall and the Mage-Templar War broke out, Samson – *Raleigh*...." Cullen cleared his throat. "Templars in the Free Marches began to find structure under... Samson's confidence. I recognised a few faces from the attack on

Haven.”

“Including Raleigh’s,” Carver followed. Cullen was unable to address his former brother-in-arms by first name. It was too personal.

Cullen nodded. “He demonstrated the sense to retreat from the vanguard early and command from the rear. Leliana is still balancing the risks for her agents, but I suspect that Samson is serving closely under Corypheus.” The former Templar hesitated. “I understand you excel at deduction.”

Carver resisted a wince, considering Cullen was opening up to him. “...At one point, guessing simply becomes conjecture.”

“When it comes to your soldiers’ safety,” Cullen returned, “would you risk silence?”

“Cullen,” Carver addressed, “you’re unafraid to speak your mind or disagree in the war room, and for that I’m grateful. For everyone’s sake, I can’t ask for blind faith. Too much of one thing can become toxic.”

Cullen’s scar quirked with his lips. “I’m not ready to accept your words without question, Carver. I *am* ready to listen.”

“Oh.” Carver reddened in embarrassment and relief.

“Regarding Samson,” Cullen moved on, “his thesis spread amongst Templars during the outbreak of the war. Samson believes that the Chantry must bear responsibility for forcibly addicting Templars and reducing the faithful to tools. If Corypheus has enabled Samson, I fear what my former brothers and sisters have been persuaded to endure.”

Addiction to red lyrium, in order to achieve the strength required to overthrow the Chantry. It was also unlikely Samson had transparently explained the effects of red lyrium before he had given it to his fellow Templars. Not all Templars could have been in agreement with the Order’s new direction, either, if the events of Therinfal Redoubt were an indicator.

Carver’s lips thinned. “You don’t need me here.”

Cullen sank into his chair, motioning for Carver to do the same with one hand while the other ran down his face. The commander seemed to gather all his courage before speaking. “Do you think there’s a cure to lyrium addiction?”

Carver carefully schooled his face. "...Not beyond naturally weaning off of it. I'm sorry to say that red lyrium is beyond anyone's comprehension at the moment."

Cullen accepted Carver's purposeful misunderstanding. "I see. Thank you for your time, Carver. You're dismissed."

Carver hesitated. "Commander, you've read my report on the trip to the future in Redcliffe. Red lyrium might initially require an organic host, but can eventually be spread to and cultivated from rock."

"...I remember. Leliana called in an arcanist to better understand the substance, among others."

Carver nodded to a map of eastern Orlais in the flurry of documents on Cullen's desk. "Sahrnia is Emprise du Lion's primary hub for exporting raw materials across Thedas, particularly wood and stone. However, with its river system frozen over by one of Thedas' coldest upcoming winters in decades, and with the civil war raging, I suspect that Sahrnia's stone quarries have become prime potential red lyrium mines for the red Templars."

The War of the Lions had actually begun to simmer down in anticipation of winter, but Cullen understood Carver's point. Emprise du Lion currently lacked structured imperial protection. With Sahrnia's townspeople unable to leave due to the frozen river, red Templars could sweep in at any time and seize control of the trading hub with a ready labour and host population. Carver had ordered his connections in the Postal Service in the region to prevent Mistress Poulin from selling her family mines to the red Templars and to coordinate with Celene's forces regarding Sahrnia's protection, but purple banners had clashed with Gaspard's chevaliers south of Emprise du Lion, repelling both from the wintry northeast. Based on the fact that Carver had recently lost contact with his agents in Sahrnia, the red Templars had likely already started moving in.

Cullen pinched his nose bridge. "Maker, we need safe passage through the region if the Inquisitor is to travel anywhere south of the Imperial Highway. I'll take your words into consideration."

Hearing the clear dismissal, Carver rose from his seat, saluted, and left the office. He was several paces out when he heard a voice.

"Ay up, big armour!" A swivel of the head revealed a woman with a choppy haircut down one end of the battlements. She cackled. "Ah canna believe yer glegged!"

Carver hesitantly walked over. “Sera?”

“An’ yer remembered me name?” Deeper surprise coloured the rogue’s tone.

Carver sighed and shook his head, dismissing his confusion. “Did you need something?”

“Yeah, hol’ this.”

Sera swung what felt like a bag of rocks into Carver’s arms, then carelessly stacked knick-knacks on top that threatened to fall off with a careless step. Carver awkwardly danced to prevent just that as he glanced around his load and spotted Sera trotting off with bunched-up blankets in her arms. He hurriedly followed her into another tower in the battlements where toasty air hit his face, before he blindly descended a stack of steps after Sera.

“What’s this all for?” Carver dared to ask.

Sera’s voice fluttered back to him through the social clamour of a crowd. “Me room!”

Carver glanced over a railing they passed. “In a tavern?”

“Stuff needs a place!”

Sera kicked a door open, leading Carver into a corner room lined with bevelled glass windows and cushioned benches. The rogue had already furnished the space in reflection of her bohemian lifestyle. Rocks, glittering baubles, and animal bones spilled out of unfinished straw baskets onto loud-coloured rugs and tossed clothes. Vining plants competed with haphazardly-hung tapestries for wall space without blocking the windows.

Sera leapt onto a cushioned bench and held her assorted blankets up one at a time. “Which ones oughta ‘ang?”

Carver heaved his load onto a nearby table, which precariously wobbled. He quickly grabbed it by the edges. “You want to add *more?*”

The rogue blew a raspberry. “Bobby off, ah dinna ax yer opinion.”

“But—?” Carver gave up, carefully kneeling to diagnose the unsteady table. He grabbed a nearby animal bone to adjust it.

“Supwiye?”

Carver swallowed a yelp at Sera’s materialisation behind him, instead slowly standing up. “Fixing your table. You’re welcome.” He tossed the animal bone aside into a basket, recognising its sharpened brethren. “You make your own arrowheads? We have a smithy, you know.”

Sera unintelligibly imitated Carver and rolled her eyes. “Are yeh always like’is?”

“Helpful?”

“Boring.”

The accusation made Carver inwardly preen. Him, dull and forgettable? “You know, Sera, you’re a great person.”

“Eh?”

“The Inquisition could use more people like you.”

“Are yeh dead touched?”

“Impossible,” Carver stated, leaving Sera’s room. “My helmet is nigh-indestructible.”

Sera suddenly darted into Carver’s personal space as he walked, sniffing like a dog. “Yeh onna puddled.” She lifted a lit candle from seemingly nowhere and held it before each of his eyes. “Naw concussed, either.”

Carver waved away the fire hazard as he descended for the tavern’s main floor. Maryden Halewell’s plucked lute trickled up the air in song while overlapping conversations and knocked mugs enveloped Carver’s awareness. The minstrel lifted her voice with *Sera Was Never* upon sight of the rogue, whose face scrunched up in response.

Carver glanced at her while navigating the populated tavern. “You don’t like it?”

“Music ‘bout me?” Sera stuck out her tongue. “Naw, ta.”

“Me too.”

“What?”



“—Theoretically.”

Sera blinked. Carver found a table and flagged down one of two active servers for a bowl of stew.

Leliana had thoroughly but swiftly hired additional staff to support the Inquisition’s growing stronghold, including a certain arcanist named Dagna to support Harritt, and replacements for Minaeve, Adan, Flissa, and Threnn while the four were relocated to less demanding posts where they could prove equally effective. A merchant that Ellana had earlier recruited in her visit to Val Royeaux had also braved the Frostbacks to replace Seggri as the Inquisition’s primary merchant connection. Bonny Sims had introduced the Inquisition to the Tradesmen merchant’s guild – lowercase letters, to delineate it from the dwarven conglomerate.

The Merchant’s Guild possessed a ruthlessness that could outstrip the Game’s, though the Tradesmen embraced *subtle* Orlesian flair. Leliana had been amused but unsurprised to hear from Carver that “Bonny Sims” was the name of a certain noble girl’s first horse. Persuading true identities from the Tradesmen would undoubtedly prove as taxing as wrestling a mabari. Meanwhile, the Inquisition’s *actual* connection to the Merchant’s Guild continued using their letters to him as shims for wobbly chairs. Varric had a special talent for exasperating the indomitable like Josephine and Cassandra. Upon Ellana’s prodding, Varric had maintained that the Merchant’s Guild would be a fruitless, even draining connection. His dismissiveness of Thedas’ most powerful trade network matched his disinterest in expanding House Tethras’ already boggling wealth.

The thought of affluence drew Carver’s gaze across the table to Sera, who seized the opportunity to stuff her face with a plate of meat and bread regardless of the disgusted expressions thrown her way. Carver knew there was a dusty roll of parchment in the royal palace identifying Sera as the sole inheritor to a late Lady Taraline Emmald’s estate in Denerim. Per Ferelden laws, the royal family was holding on to the property until its rightful owner could return to claim it. Carver hadn’t informed anyone of the situation; he just *knew* certain figures like Kallian would delight in learning of an elven noble, however humble in rank. Not to speak of Anora, and by extension her Orlesian girl friends.

At that moment, the Iron Bull slid into a seat next to Sera’s with a nudge and his own plate of food. “Hey Sera, did you see that redhead the other day? She was easy on the eyes.”

Sera choked her food down in one gulp. “The one wi’ th’ huge tiddies?”

“No! Well, yes, but....” Bull leaned in conspiratorially. “What about the fancy bow on her apron, dangling all long and sassy, so someone could ease it open with one slow pull? You have to see the little details to get the whole person, Sera. There’s a woman behind those tits.”

“Yeah,” Sera snorted around a mouthful of meat. “*Waaaay* behind.”

Carver morosely lowered his spoon. “Really? In front of my stew?”

Sera tore into her bread. “Yer donna like redheads?”

“I’m not particular,” Carver deadpanned.

Bull chuckled into an ale. “It means he has no taste.” He placatingly raised his hands at Carver’s expression. “We’re defying the end of the world as we know it! You should make the most of your time, be happy with someone. What or who do *you* think about before you fall asleep?”

Sera swallowed loudly. “Are they brune’e? Black-‘aired? Blonde? Wait, it bett’onna be me!”

“It’s not,” Carver corrected Sera flatly, before snapping back to reality. “In fact, it’s none of your business. I’m done eating.”

Carver inwardly berated himself. Bull was a *spy*. He behaved like an arse — an unfiltered, nonchalant mercenary only around for the money — to evoke truthful reactions out of people. If Bull hadn’t already, he would readily admit so to Ellana after making her play the role of Grim and listen to Bull shoot the breeze with random Inquisition soldiers. In regards to Ellana, whom Bull had willingly revealed his Qunari connections with, the spy called her “boss” — just one vowel away from *bas*. Hissrad drew lines in the sand with those outside the Qun.

Genuine — if muffled — concern left Sera’s perpetually-stuffed mouth. “Yer reet? You’ve barely et.”

“Compared to you, I’m sure it seems that way.”

Bull shovelled a chunk of meat from his plate into Carver’s bowl before he could retreat. “No way you’re full — and if not, don’t worry.

We'll develop a large appetite in you yet."

"I'm not a child!"

Sera guffawed, pointing a piece of bread at Carver. "Tha's what children say!"

"She tried," Cole murmured from next to Carver. "The cookies were good until the hate made it bitter in your mouth."

Sera choked, thumping her chest with a fist while Bull's good eye fractionally widened. The former finally recovered with a large swallow and bristled. "Where did *yeh* pop outta!?"

Cole peered from beneath his hat's brim. "I've been here since you sat down."

"Dinna Varric tell yeh tah — wear a bell or summat?" Sera exasperated.

"Dorian told Solas the same," Cole unhelpfully provided, turning to Carver. "*Cullen* is quiet, behind the noise. He wants me away from Ellana. Vivienne too. The three of us might be headed to the lion's hold."

Carver blinked. "Emprise du Lion?"

"The red Templars like the cold," Cole confirmed. "It makes the red less angry."

So, Cullen was going to send Cole and Vivienne with Carver and a complement of his soldiers to investigate the possible presence of red Templars in Orlais' coldest region, conveniently far from Ellana. Carver wrestled with feeling flattered or miffed that the others trusted him and Vivienne with Cole. More likely, it had been Vivienne's idea that *when* the inner circle would decide to send Cole on a mission away from Ellana, Vivienne would also be sent to supervise him. Just Carver's luck that the near-empath would be present while Carver used the Inquisition to reclaim Sahrnia for the Postal Service. Hopefully the spirit understood the gravity of a *secret* identity.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm *dying* to have Carver meaningfully interact with Bull, but I also want him to closely interact with each DAI companion.... Why can't I download my thoughts onto paper....

It's fun writing Sera! I know for voice acting reasons her lines had to be "intelligible" for all English speakers, but I like the idea of someone who unapologetically speaks with their own accent being a valued member of an institution like the Inquisition, and a valued companion of the Inquisitor.

Side note: I'm glad Diego Luna stood his ground with his accent upon entering Star Wars. If you don't know already, I'm a *HUGE* Star Wars fan. This fic isn't just a love letter to my favourite video game, but it's also helping me get back into writing my flagship fic, AUP, after Disney broke my heart. It's nice to dedicate myself to consistently writing. I can't stop expressing my gratitude for everyone's support for this fic!

# Myth

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for the health tips and warm comments everyone, and enjoy the new chapter!

While Carver's party and soldiers moved to clear out a safe passage for the Inquisition and its allies in Emprise du Lion, two main parties from Skyhold navigated the long way around via the Imperial Highway to address venatori activity:

Since Celene commanded northern Orlais while Gaspard's chevaliers held the south, the heat of the civil war was largely felt in the middling band of the Exalted Plains in the Dales. However, after both armies in the plains had retreated to their respective camps for a brief respite and in consideration of the coming winter, Val Royeaux had suddenly lost all contact with them. With equally alarming swiftness, anti-state deserters of the Orlesian Imperial Army had begun sparking anarchy across the region as a united splinter group called the Freemen of the Dales, which Carver warned Leliana could be the Venatori's unwitting hand in sowing dissent within Orlesian armies. Ellana was thus addressing the breakdown of communication in the plains with the ultimate aim of stabilising the region, supported by a small, effective party per Josephine's advice. The Inquisition lacked the influence to march into a volatile area without coming across as just another unwanted hostile conquering force. In Ellana's company was consequently her ever faithful guard Cassandra, the Bull's Chargers whom Orlais knew to be professional, and Dorian who intended to sniff out and neutralise any venatori influence.

Though Solas apparently expressed a desire to stick by Ellana's side for the mission, he recognised the necessity of a mage's insight for another task. Sightings of venatori in the Hissing Wastes suggested that they were searching the ruins of the long-abandoned colony for forgotten power. Indeed, according to Carver's conjecture and Solas' journeys through the Fade, Paragon Fairel's tomb lied buried in the abandoned desert, containing the sort of remarkable and deadly runes that had earned the genius his title. While the Inquisition couldn't establish a steady presence in the Hissing Wastes, they *could* investigate the disturbing venatori activity, leading Leliana to send a portion of her scouts to intervene with minimal military protection under Thom's command. Varric, Sera, and Solas joined the escort in

support.

The three-prong approach allowed the Inquisition to address multiple issues and solidify its influence at the same time without having to build up equal strength to Celene, Gaspard, and Corypheus' forces combined. However, the strategy's effectiveness depended on each party's ability to blitz through their task, not allowing their enemies time to recover. If they wanted any hope of preventing southern Thedas' fall to complete anarchy, they had to neutralise such issues in time for Duchess Florian's ball in the Winter Palace at the end of the year — just weeks away. The Inquisition needed influence to secure entry into the Grand Ball. Carver's connections could only acquire him so many invitations.

The winter peace talks were an opportunity to obtain foolproof blackmail against Gaspard and orchestrate an end to the elven rebellion through altar diplomacy; however, this meant that Florian couldn't be scared off from hosting the ball as she planned. While Carver, Celene, and Briala could technically trudge the long, assured path of finding alternate blackmail against Gaspard and of legally, permanently defanging Florian before she could usurp anyone, the Inquisition was a ready resource to neutralise both de Chalons with expected thoroughness against an ally of Corypheus. In a way, the Inquisition's actions in Orlais were helping Celene and Briala in a time where they were utterly swamped with issues.

Carver vainly warded off guilt at the thought of "using" the Inquisition while he led Vivienne, Cole, and a squadron of his soldiers into Emprise du Lion. Just west of the Frostbacks, Orlais' bitterly cold region was as perilous as it was breathtaking. Frozen waterfalls and rivers cut through a jagged, rocky expanse blanketed with snow and frosted alpine trees, and the plummeting temperatures had made tinkling glass out of Sahrnia's vining plants and underbrush. Yet when the occasional arctic breeze swept through Carver's path, arbour blessings and rashvines in the trees elegantly fluttered like silver ribbons, lending the sound of wind chimes. The sudden crack of a nearby rift made Carver flinch.

"Note that down."

"Aye, ser."

Carver continued descending for the main town of Sahrnia while his soldiers split off to secure the roads and mark rifts on their maps. Given the modest size of Carver's current squadron, they could only

either protect Carver, Vivienne, and Cole as they moved, or protect the town. At the moment, while Vivienne and Cole followed Carver past a couple sentries watching a rift on a frozen exorheic lake, the squad's priority was to protect the locals from stray demons. Carver and his party could handle themselves.

Sahrnia's economic suffering was evident in its dilapidated rustic structures ordinarily well-maintained, and scars of battle further separated the town from its orderly reputation. When Carver's party revealed they came bearing dried goods, the townspeople streamed out of their boarded-up houses with one hand palm-up and one hand on a shovel or axe. The locals were few and either elderly or young, no in-between. Vivienne ignored the cold to gracefully pass out rations in only her enchanter robes — albeit lined with fur — and made sure to trade her name for each villager's. The iron lady's warm hands melted away everyone's initial suspicion. Carver suspected that the mage was magically maintaining her body temperature.

Carver made eye contact as he handed out bread. "I seek Mistress Poulin."

Several squints answered him. "What do you want with her?"

"A discussion of trade."

Gazes turned to the frozen river with obvious doubt. "...The miss is out right now."

"When will she return?"

"We're not talking to an outsider."

One of the elderly wrenched rations out of Carver's hands with sudden spite, and the younger townspeople visibly backed off after their turn of receiving food, quickly filtering back into their homes.

Carver murmured to the rest seeking bread. "Are there other outsiders here? Merchants? ...Mesdames et messieurs, I'm with the Inquisition; we believe in helping others back up on their feet, that there might be a little more right in this world."

The thin crowd around Carver's party faltered, but no one would meet his eyes. When the food ran out, the elderly followed the young back into their homes and locked their doors up, save for a few stragglers curiously shadowing the Inquisition soldiers around town. Dull thumping drew Carver's party to a sparse corner of town where

cobblestones crumbled away into frozen dirt and twisting roots. There, a lanky boy barely in his teens swung his axe into a tree that seemed more ice than wood, yet a small pile of lumber sat nearby.

“Pardon,” Carver gently approached, “have any Templars cut through here?”

The boy lowered his axe and looked over at them, eyes catching on Vivienne’s robes. A tense pause preceded his shy nod.

“...Red?”

“And mean,” the boy quietly confirmed, yet a subtle heat burned in his voice. “They took my brother — his friends, too, and none of them are mages. I know it!”

“They also took Mistress Poulin,” Carver guessed. “All the adults. I’m looking for a friend of mine: a merchant who must’ve come here just before the river froze.” Carver’s latest contact in Sahrnia could have introduced themselves as Fereldan or Antivan, and names were always a coin toss. “They were interested in Mistress Poulin’s mines.”

The boy tightly gripped his axe, head bowed. “They took *everyone*.”

“Take me, he says,” Cole murmured, “I can work for two people. Just leave him alone. The red Templars laugh, a fist comes down. I’m very sorry.”

The boy blinked away tears and confusion. “Thank you.”

Carver’s party departed in the direction of Sahrnia’s quarries, leaving the squadron to guard the town. “The red Templars must have a stronghold here to supervise the mines,” he told his party. “If we uproot them from their base, we send them scattering. They can’t watch their backs and force the townspeople to mine for them at the same time.”

Vivienne swiftly traced his footsteps through thick underbrush. “It was a mistake to use Haven as a base of operations. The town was completely indefensible.”

“I...know.”

“It was a miscalculation, one I’m sure you won’t repeat,” Vivienne continued past Carver’s conflicted confusion, though she clicked her teeth when he didn’t respond straight away. “A mistake.”



“I understand.”

“You — indeed, *everyone* — must learn not to similarly err twice, so that innocents will never suffer the consequences of one’s decisions again.”

Ah. “I see.”

Cole spoke subtly giddy. “You think caring makes you weak. Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

Vivienne sped up, shooting Carver a glance. “Restrain your pet demon. I don’t want it talking to me.”

Cole was still going. “Everything bright, roar of anger as the demon rears. No, I will not fall. No one will control me ever again. Flash of white as the world comes back. Shaking, hollow, Harrowed, but smiling at Templars to show them I’m me. I am not like that. I can protect you. If Templars come for you, I will kill them.”

“Delightful,” Vivienne drawled.

“You like the name ‘Carver,’” Cole observed non sequitur. “It reminds you of Carver.”

“I do,” Carver confirmed.

“That’s why you trust me,” Cole said. “I like that. The three of us are going to help a lot of people.”

“We’ll ambush the red Templars in their stronghold,” Carver decided, steering the conversation back on track before Cole could pick up speed. “Considering the quarries’ locations, their base is most likely Suledin Keep. They don’t know the Inquisition’s in Emprise du Lion yet, so we must strike fast and *hard* — aim for their leader, if we can. Then hightail out of there.” He nodded to a thin white structure speckled with red lyrium and standing tall over Sahrnia. “If we get separated, regroup north of the Tower of Bone. My sergeant and his squadron are straight down the hill.”

Vivienne flashed shields up just before a blast of Fade energy suddenly splashed against them. The party joined a lone figure in deep purple and golden armour fending off stray demons, and with support, they made quick work of the shades and wraiths. As the group caught their breath, the stranger removed his helmet and wiped sweat back from golden locks and hazel blue eyes.

“Many thanks, Inquisition.”

Carver hadn't had time to equip his helmet, and peered at the blonde freely. Carver's emblazoned armour had likely identified his party as part of the Inquisition. “You shouldn't be out here alone...chevalier?”

The regal as opposed to snarling lion bevelled on the stranger's chest plate separated him from chevaliers under Gaspard. Vivienne's greeting solved the mystery.

“Ser Michel de Chevin, my has it been so long.”

“Madame Vivienne,” Celene's champion greeted. Compared to the light or grey blues of other humans, Michel's hazel eyes leaned towards a subtle green — a quality Carver wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't known to look for it. “Pardon my current state. Empress Celene has ordered my hunt of a cunning desire demon called Imshael, and he barrages me with summoned demons at every turn.”

*What!?*

Carver spluttered. “What concern has Celene over a stray demon?”

“*Empress* Celene,” Vivienne immediately corrected, affronted.

“Apologies,” Carver hastily recovered, introducing himself. “I'm Carver of Lothering.”

Michel straightened in understanding with his gaze focusing on Carver. “I know not the full origins of the demon, but my master's partner has witnessed a Dalish clan pay the price for summoning Imshael, and insists on his extermination.”

Carver frowned. It was possible that Felassan had used his trusting dalen Briala to acquire an eluvian keystone from Imshael, only to admire Briala's will and decidedly turn down her offer of the keystone's password. Having failed to provide Solas the password, Felassan would have then been killed by his master, leaving the living with the problem that was Imshael. Unable to trust anyone with the demon, Briala must have asked Celene for help, resulting in Michel's quest and apparent lack of personal knowledge regarding Imshael. Fortunately, Celene and Briala trusted few with the fact that they had connections with the Postboy, and Michel was Celene's loyal champion, recognised by even Celene's enemy Gaspard as the exemplar chevalier. Michel had the privilege of knowing the Postboy's identity.

Carver subdued a click of his teeth. In a way, all issues pointed back to Solas. At least Briala had gained access to an eluvian network to better fulfil their mission.... Maker, if Solas hadn't already deduced Carver's connection with Celene and Briala, would he mistakenly blame Felassan's failure on Carver? Resourceful he might be, Carver was *not* a mastermind of the likes that Solas could imagine.

"Borrowed body, broken box, a world — *bigger*," Cole uttered. "Order: an apple in my hand, beyond my reach. You think lowly of yourself." Compassion tinged Cole's voice. "Do you want to hear what Solas thinks of you?"

"—**No**," Carver brusquely rejected, then guiltily sighed. "Ser Michel, this is Cole, a spirit of compassion helping the Inquisition. We plan to strike at Imshael in Suledin Keep with a hit-and-run."

To his credit, Michel nodded after only a brief pause, readily accepting Carver's decision. "You have my sword."

"You honour us with your aid." Carver resumed the party's trek for the keep, ignoring Vivienne's coolly analytical frown in his direction. "Considering Imshael's presence in Sahrnia, he must be the source of the red Templars' structure in the area. While they follow his orders, he can help cultivate red lyrium for them from Sahrnia's townspeople and stone quarries. We should expect him, a retinue of red Templars, and possibly a few giants in Suledin Keep."

"Giants?" Vivienne echoed with knitted manicured brows.

"Before the river froze over," Carver shared, "there were less sightings of giants in Emprise du Lion, despite the fact that they primarily haunt waterways." His contacts in the region had informed him so, before they had gone silent. It had been a small matter for merchants travelling up and down the river to observe wildlife. "The red Templars' expanded mining may have disrupted the local ecosystem and drawn the giants' ire. Though they might've been wiped out, we should ready ourselves for the possibility that a few yet remain near the red Templars." Infected with red lyrium due to Imshael, no doubt.

"Suledin Keep is an elven ruin," Michel remarked. "The east entrance is the most shattered and undoubtedly heavily-guarded. However, overgrowth has nearly made a forest out of it. We would do well to take advantage of the camouflage."

"Cole," Carver addressed as the keep slowly towered into view, "scout ahead one chamber at a time for hostiles and report back; Madame

Vivienne, use fade step to then ambush them alongside Cole while Ser Michel and I down the rest. Silence and speed are key. Should any giants spot us, leave them to me and Ser Michel; just keep running for the topmost floor of the keep where the red Templars have their banners raised. Imshael should be directing his allies from there.”

The party nodded and quickly swept through Suledin Keep, avoiding dead-ends and unlocking passageways thanks to Cole’s help and stealth. They barely met resistance until they reached a hill of rubble that led to the open sky and the remains of the keep’s second floor, where the trees dwindled and makeshift walkways to the upper floor began. The instant a gargantuan foot crushed a tree in the party’s path, they scattered like ants.

“Intruders!” a velveteen voice snarled from above.

Carver ducked from a giant’s swing and cut the tendons in its ankle with a heavy slash from Summer Sword. Shouts from red Templars rose as they peered into a scene of two infected giants wreaking havoc in the heart of Suledin Keep while Vivienne and Cole raced upstairs for Imshael. The red Templars seemed discouraged from entering the battle for now — indeed, they shrank away when a giant ferally dug its hand into the keep and scooped out bits of wall to slam down on Michel. Vivienne and Cole’s feet touched the second floor in time for the same giant to collapse backwards into the makeshift stairs, crushing all access to the floor and evoking a brief earthquake. Carver glanced aside to see Michel — the mad lad armed only with a knight sword and his agility — wrench his blade free from the giant’s other ankle and roll aside its fist. The chevalier’s heavy, frozen armour was likely the only reason why he hadn’t already slain both giants.

“Unwise intruders! If you won’t be smart, be afraid!”

Carver ran and slid beneath a swing from the last standing giant while Imshael’s battle against Carver’s company raged above. A cut at precarious stone and wood held up by rope sent the remaining walkways crashing on the standing giant, unbalancing it long enough for Carver to split its calf open. He and Michel wordlessly met gazes before they ran up its back as it tipped forwards into the other giant, concussing both and granting Carver and Michel the momentum to leap onto the second floor with swords swinging.

“Xebenkeck! Gaxkang! Give me strength—— *Agh!*”

Carver intercepted the demon in mid-attack with a mana-draining

strike, just before Vivienne, Michel, and Cole simultaneously stabbed him. Vivienne's spirit blade had the pleasure of decapitating the demon and sending it back to the Fade.

Carver slumped in place, panting with overwhelming exhaustion. A war cry from red Templars below spurred the party to meet gazes.

"Time to depart?" Michel dryly suggested.

They cut down a towering flagpole on the second floor where a red Templar flag billowed down with it, crashing into a copse of trees outside the keep. Carver's party bolted down the pole and the cloaked earth before vanishing into the forest. They eventually caught their breath at the Tower of Bone where Sahrnia's landscape rolled out around them.

Vivienne nauseously glanced at the red lyrium growths running up the tower. "With the demon gone, the red Templars' mining operation is shattered — for now."

Michel peered down at Sahrnia's stone quarries identifiable by massive mining tools infected with a red glow. "The news is already travelling. They're abandoning the mines to regroup elsewhere."

"What of the townspeople?" Vivienne frowned.

"Caged and cold, their craft cutting into the crust of their iced skin," Cole began, then gasped away from the emotion. "We must help them."

The party's eyes drifted to Carver as he silently stared at Sahrnia's quarry system below. With the red Templars' mass confusion and haste, it resembled a panicked anthill.

Or a kicked hornets' nest.

Retrieving the captive townspeople risked encountering and drawing the focused attention of the red Templars. Civilians could end up caught in the violence. At the same time, Carver was utterly confident his contacts in the Postal Service would be *rearing* to defy essential slave drivers. Oriana's network hadn't kicked out Tevinter opportunists from Denerim during the Blight for nothing.

"Ser Michel," Carver addressed, "notify Sergeant Geoffrey to reduce protection around the town to minimal security and send the rest of the squadron to the tower. We'll be sending freed townspeople to

them.”

Michel nodded and swiftly ran north to Carver’s soldiers while the rest of the party hurried to the closest quarry. Vivienne cast a small-scale blizzard around them, reducing visibility and driving lagging red Templars away, while simultaneously casting a layer of shields over them. Carver kept watch as Cole lock-picked a cage of people open. Tears of relief frosted the civilians’ faces with freedom.

Carver wrapped a captive in his cloak before Vivienne led the march back to the Tower of Bone. The freed captive’s teeth shattered. “M-Many thanks.”

“I keep mail here,” Carver murmured. “My last letter arrived just before the river froze.”

A head peeked up from his cloak. “A-And you came t-to check on it p-personally?”

Carver met their wet gaze.

“S-*Signore*,” the person openly wept. “Y-You’re *him*: il *signore*. We thought...a m-myth....”

Carver could imagine it: veritable strangers from varied backgrounds secretly passing and following orders for a bigger image they couldn’t fully comprehend, only knowing that beneath the layers of the Postal Service’s actions was a common good, an idea. The Postboy. Should anyone come to a captured merchant’s rescue, it would be someone entrusted with the task from high up, not someone who could claim the network as his own.

“No myth.” Carver stroked their back to encourage warmth. “I’m here.”

X

As the red Templars panicked out of Sahrnia, the Inquisition and people secretly part of the Postal Service quickly reunited families, secured the main export hub, and linked it with Skyhold’s trade network through the mountains to at least buoy Sahrnia through the winter. From there, the Inquisition began the process of securing Emprise du Lion from the red Templars, primarily focusing on a mercantile route through the region that would allow the Inquisition safe passage into the rest of the Dales. This helped reconnect frayed areas of the Postal Service and provide new opportunities, while

allowing those who didn't wish to continue working in their region to return home and recover. Carver also warned Oriana that red Templars pushed out of Emprise du Lion might soon target an old dwarven port on the Storm Coast to gain access to the Waking Sea — an act worthy of the lady's ire to be sure.

After the events of Sahrnia, Michel quietly thanked Carver for his assistance with Imshael before the champion returned back to his master's side. Grand Chancellor Roderick meanwhile took advantage of the Inquisition's secure presence in the northeastern Dales to travel through the region, advocating Ellana as Andraste's chosen. Cooperating with Josephine, Roderick eventually changed directions and settled in Val Royeaux as the Inquisition's formal ambassador to also develop alliances. Between him and Mother Giselle, more Chantry officials were growing inclined towards speaking positively of the Inquisition, eventually also daring to support and ask for their help.

Between Sahrnia's recovery and Ellana's work in the Exalted Plains, the Inquisition saw more recruits, restoring Xanthe's troop count and boosting the promotion of two more captains with their own soldiers. One captain was Miadahl, an Orlesian half-elf who had long been rising Maker's Breath's ranks under a more "human" and thus acceptable name, "Mia"; only recently with Ellana's promotion had Miadahl grown comfortable enough to cease passing as a human thanks to her inherited small features and curved ears. Another captain was Lilou Vaillancourt, a retired guard-captain who had been in service to a noble, now inspired to restore order to more than the village in the Dales she had been found guarding. When Carver, Vivienne, and Cole finally returned to Skyhold, Ellana and the other parties had already arrived and settled back in, allowing the inner circle to quickly update them and introduce Carver to his new fellow captains.

It was to Skyhold's guest hall that Dorian had eventually summoned Carver for Ellana, explaining that she apparently wanted all of her companions for her next quest.

"And then — listen to this — he said he'd buy me *dinner* first!"

Carver's lips quirked. "So Bull went the flirty route with you?"

"*With you?*" Dorian echoed, gaze narrowing.

"He's a spy." Carver nodded to Bull lounging in a cushioned chair, also waiting for Ellana to appear and share her mission. "He prodded

me earlier on who I prefer to lay with. You can tell a lot about someone based on that.”

“Yer can,” Sera cackled from where she sat braiding Thom’s beard.

“I got the asshole route,” Carver concluded, only to immediately regret his words.

Half of the hall burst with laughter, thanks to Thom, Sera, Bull, and Dorian. Solas and Vivienne sat in weary silence while Cole peered aside to them with an honest request for clarification.

Carver groaned into the collar of his surcoat. “When are the others getting here...?”

The doors to the guest hall suddenly opened, revealing a lightly-armoured figure who strolled in only to freeze.

Carver shot up from his chair, furiously pointing. “*You!* You are on the *wrong* side of the Waking Sea!”

Garrett angrily huffed with a gesture. “A *letter!*?”

“I made sure it reached you this time!”

Garrett pounded his fist into his palm and ran at Carver, swinging. “I should’ve done this a *long* time ago!”

**CRASH!**

“Maker’s breath!” Dorian spluttered as Carver took Garrett’s punch and swung back — only to suffer an arm spin that landed Carver in a table, splitting it in half.

The two brothers wrestled for leverage without care for the broken table — then chair — then shelves as they quickly descended into a brawl. Carver couldn’t tell who between him and Garrett was shouting louder or fighting rougher, and a passionate strike of lightning from Garrett’s staff sheathed on his back sparked Carver’s temper as it barely missed him.

“Oh *that’s* it——!”

Holy flames flared out from Carver’s elbow as he struck it into Garrett’s armoured side.

The older Hawke rolled away and up to his feet with a draw of his



staff mirrored by Carver with Summer Sword. “Oh I’m going to *enjoy this!*” Garrett yelled.

*CLANG!*

Garrett whipped his staff’s blade at the tip of Summer Sword to keep Carver at a distance, then threw fire with a reverse sweep of his staff. Carver cancelled it with his own holy fire and ran at Garrett, leaping over a table Garrett telekinetically threw from his periphery and cutting aside a tossed chair leg. Their weapons met in brief contact that spun and earned Garrett’s thigh a smack from the flat of Carver’s blade.

“Andraste’s balls!” Garrett cursed.

“That doesn’t even make sense!” Carver barked.

*BANG.*

“*What are you two doing!?*”

Carver and Garrett’s heads whipped up at the sight of Ellana gaping from the doorway. The two brothers straightened.

“He started it.”

Carver spluttered at Garrett’s pointed finger. “I did *not*——!”

“Quiet!” Ellana demanded.

Carver coughed. “Apologies, Ellana. I lost my composure.”

“Save the date!” Garrett declared. “Carver lost his composure!”

“*Garrett,*” Carver furiously whispered.

Ellana stepped closer, pointing between them. “You two *know* each other?”

Carver slowly breathed, realising everyone in the guest hall had moved to one side near Ellana while the rest of the hall was trashed and lightly burned. The space that Josephine had devoted to accepting guests was ruined.

Carver sighed, hand grudgingly gesturing to Garrett while his tongue struggled past even greater reluctance.

“...He’s my older brother.”

# Junior

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The guest hall's tapestries and rugs seemed to absorb Carver's answer before they could reach Ellana and the rest. The hall was quiet. Yet an unintelligible splutter abruptly possessed Ellana, and Dorian clearly gestured at Carver and Garrett.

"You have a *mage sibling*?"

Garrett smugly replied, "Try *two*."

Ellana recovered from her shock. "Hawke's your older brother!?"

Thom perked up. "Hawke, as in——"

"Yes, yes," Garrett tiredly confirmed, "the Champion of Kirkwall."

"And *viscount*," Carver sharply reproached. "Honestly, Garrett, you can't just prance off on an adventure and abandon your office! Who did you leave the paperwork to: Mother? *Uncle Gamlen*?"

"They seem to be doing fine."

"Maker's breath, you *did*!?"

Garrett slung an arm around Carver's shoulder and snorted at Ellana. "I appreciate your patience with my brother, Inquisitor; Carver feels compelled to micromanage *everything*."

Carver protested. "*One of us* has to be responsible, and it's certainly not going to be *you*! At least Bethany——"

"Oh, Bethany, whom you always prefer!" Garrett intoned. "She can do no wrong! Just because she founded the Illuminati——"

"It's not just that," Carver refuted. "She *respects* the responsibilities thrust upon her. *You* would rather play 'fetch the criminal' with Brute than run the literal city-state depending on you!"

Garrett groaned theatrically. "You move your lips and Cavin's voice comes out."

“I pity your seneschal.”

“Besides,” Garrett continued, “didn’t *you* name Bethany’s fraternity the Illuminati and tell her to become a first enchanter!?”

“...Those were just suggestions.”

Ellana held up a hand, and silence fell. “I thought the Champion’s younger brother was Junior Hawke?”

Carver spluttered. “*Junior—!?*”

Ellana lowered her arm and motioned everyone to gather together, revealing Varric standing at the edge of the doorway, wincing.

The merchant prince shuffled in. “It’s not like I used *everyone’s* real name in the book....”

Carver shot him a flat stare.

Varric raised his hands in a placating gesture. “I had to censor your secrets out of my writing — which is basically everything about you! That left me with what Hawke had shared *before* we met.” He squinted. “I thought you read it?”

Carver drawled. “Tethras, why would I read a tale about my *brother?*”

“See, that’s precisely the tone that inspires the image of an inferiority complex.”

“I just don’t read *fantasies* about people I know!”

Varric placed a hand over his heart in false shock. “Why Shiny, I’ll have you know that the Tale of the Champion *accurately* captures your brother.”

Garrett shook his head fondly in denial, releasing his hold on Carver to wrestle Varric into a brief hug and pat on the back. Beyond them, Loghain in warden blues strolled in and closed the doors behind himself with finality, joining Ellana’s huddle.

Carver self-consciously straightened and futilely fixed his roughed-up appearance. “Teyrn Loghain.”

“Ser Carver,” the man acknowledged, standing at rest beside Ellana. “It’s Warden now, as you know.”

Garrett nudged Carver. “While Varric and I were investigating red lyrium independent of the Seekers——”

Varric coughed. “Which is why Cassandra is fuming in the war room.”

“——I thought I’d reach out to a trustworthy warden unlike the ones who, you know, tried to weaponize Corypheus. So I wrote to your former superior officer.”

Loghain dryly revealed, “Ser Carver forcibly conscripted me into the Wardens as punishment for poisoning a noble.”

The guest hall was inclined to silence, truly.

“We parted on good terms,” Carver allowed.

“I’m going to unpack all this later,” Ellana pressed on. “Warden Loghain has insight on the Orlesian Order’s internal collapse, and Soldier’s Peak *must* open its gates for a senior warden.”

“And kill him, should they honour the law of desertion,” Thom said. “I remember our last orders, Senior Warden. We’re traitors for acting beyond Warden-Commander Clarel’s reach, and if Soldier’s Peak asks if we come with her blessing, I won’t lie.”

“It’s worth a try,” Loghain gravely stated. “The Warden-Commander is working towards creating a demon army out of the Order and sending us all down the Deep Roads for the remaining archdemons. Only recently with Viscount Garrett’s help did I learn that the source of Warden-Commander Clarel’s insanity is a Tevinter called Livius Erimond.”

Dorian scoffed. “Another magister attracted to the Venatori’s agenda. No doubt he intends to betray the Wardens and equip Corypheus with the demon army.”

“Varric and I fought Corypheus,” Garrett said. “We owe it to those affected by his depravity to permanently finish him.”

Carver frowned. “I was there as well, Garrett.”

“You were unconscious for the last part of the fight,” Garrett pointed out. “I dealt the killing blow, and even with preparation, I failed to contain Corypheus’ blight magic. With all of us working together, we might stand a better chance of ending him.”

Ellana crossed her arms. “We’re all headed to Soldier’s Peak tomorrow to persuade the Wardens to join us and confront the Orlesian Order in Adamant Fortress. The Wardens have to realise that Corypheus is crippling them with fear through an artificial Calling. Should diplomacy fail...prepare for battle.”

X

The trek to Soldier’s Peak was awkward. Ellana’s party led a force of three-hundred men and women east past Lake Calenhad and through the North Road for the Dryden territory, armed but spread out. Ellana was unwilling to bring more soldiers and be mistaken for a force that intended to conquer the territory.

While Ellana called Cassandra and Varric up to the front of the party to talk, Garrett shoulder-checked Carver and jerked his chin at the latter’s split lip. “Hey, pup.”

“Mutt,” Carver returned. “Are we good?”

“We’re good.” Garrett ruffled his hair and pulled away when Carver swatted him. The older Hawke winced at his own bruises. “So, any of your friends still at Soldier’s Peak? Like Cousland? Mahariel?”

“Last I heard,” Carver confirmed, “but I lost contact with them after the conclave explosion. How’s Fenris?”

“He’s taken up hobbies.” Garrett shrugged. “He paints the Free Marches with slavers’ blood when some idiots see the coming apocalypse as an opportunity. When he’s not killing people, he’s walking Brute and helping Mother with her garden. Mostly Fenris stands there and hands her whichever odd tool she asks for while planting. It’s cute. Don’t tell him I said that.”

“You won’t need to worry with me,” Carver assured, then looked at Ellana making peace between Cassandra and Varric. “What else has Tethras been up to outside of the Seekers’ notice?”

Garrett snorted. “What is he not up to? One of his pet projects is deciphering the identity of some ‘Postboy.’”

Carver tripped. As Garrett explained it, there was the rare person with the family name “Briefträger” or even more on point, “Postman,” but they often lacked the motivation to be thoroughly involved in the Waking Sea’s trade network. Before his illness, Bartrand had an opinion shared by others of the Merchant’s Guild where the Postboy

was a dwarf. It explained the figure's ingenuity and how he had yet to be caught in a raid, even a glimpse of him. Dwarves were averse to sailing or otherwise spending time on water. Gorim Saelac in Denerim had thus been suspected at one point, especially considering his relationship with a connected Antivan merchant named Cesar. Apparently, however, neither were involved in the Postal Service; Cesar was merely the main funder for Gorim's inventions.

Garrett also shared that Bethany and the Illuminati members she had gathered in Château Haine had attracted the presence of mages and a few Templars seeking refuge from the war. After the conclave explosion, the scattered mages who hadn't chosen to follow Fiona to Redcliffe had apparently gathered in the fortified château, Wynne among them. The gracefully old woman was now coordinating with Bethany on returning order across the Free Marches while battling away red Templars and opportunistic slavers drawn by the chaos. A number of Dalish could even be spotted traversing the Vimmark Mountains to pass by Château Haine, exchanging information with the Illuminati and its allies to help steer clans out of trouble. Between Bethany, Merrill, and surprisingly Charade, the bare bones of a comparatively efficient social network had developed out of Château Haine with at first the intention of stabilising arcane-affected societies, but now all of Marcher society in effect.

In a way, Carver should have expected it, given the Friends of Red Jenny included Charade and — at least in the past — Sebastian, as one of a certain “three brothers in Starkhaven.” One of Garrett's other purposes for sneaking into Skyhold was apparently to help Bethany determine if the Illuminati would benefit from an alliance with the Inquisition. And to swat Carver for her.

At that point, Ellana's conversation had concluded, freeing Varric to find Garrett's side, and Cassandra to fall back alongside Loghain, Vivienne, and Bull. Carver sped up, leaving Varric and Garrett to chat with Sera, Thom, and Cole while Ellana found Solas and Dorian's company. She perked up at the sight of Carver and motioned him over.

“Entertain my curiosity for a moment.” Ellana's eyes glittered. “What *has* Varric censored about you from the Tale?”

“How would I know?” Carver defended. “I've never read it.”

“It's in Skyhold's library,” Dorian mischievously shared.

Carver coughed, rejecting the offer. "...The fact that I'm in Maric's Shield."

Ellana frowned. "That's it?"

"I've been its captain since age eighteen," Carver elaborated. "A knight since earlier, and then there are the——"

"The...?"

"Songs," Carver miserably finished.

A noise of delight left Ellana. "You're Fen'halam!"

Solas whiplashed. "*What?*"

Ellana squeezed Carver's shoulder warmly. "It all makes sense! Your relationship with Leliana, the Wardens, the fact you can perform a smite. Those songs must all be about the same person — *you!* "

"Fen'halam?" Dorian echoed.

"Wolfsbane," Solas curtly translated, flatly staring at Carver.

Whatever, Dread Wolf.

"As Clan Siona shares it, Carver saved them from werewolves," Ellana shared. "It's too easy to associate Fen'halam with an idea than a single person. Leliana also laments that she can't write more about you. Apparently you've killed six dragons?"

"Three," Carver quickly denied. "Dragon thralls don't count, and *Warden Faren* killed the archdemon."

Dorian incredulously swivelled his head away and peered at the warden fortress atop Soldier's Peak rising ahead. "Well, I feel more assured now. If the Wardens don't heed even a friend's words, we're going to find ourselves fighting an entire army of people who specialise in apocalypses."

The party and accompanying soldiers marched to a halt at the keep's front doors, not a few of them gaping in awe at the flourishing flora. Since Carver had last seen it, Soldier's Peak had exponentially grown in size and beauty. The lack of blood or demons was a good sign that the Fereldan Order hadn't followed their sister order's path. Loghain and Thom stepped forward and announced themselves, demanding entry into the keep. Everyone waited three stifling minutes of silence



before Loghain sent Carver a look.

Carver mumbled. “Maybe the Wardens are arguing over if they should open the doors.”

“Or they’re readying an attack,” Dorian proposed.

Carver stood next to Loghain and raised his voice. “This is Carver of Lothering, Captain of Maric’s Shield and the Inquisition! I come as a friend of the Wardens!”

Another minute stretched by.

Carver glanced back. “I don’t think——“

*CREEEAAK.*

Everyone’s eyes riveted to the large oak doors of the keep slowly swinging open, revealing an albino elf in warden leathers and chainmail. The man leaned off the doors and lifted his chin, where burgundy ink drew eyes to antlers tattooed on his forehead.

Sudden emotion caught Carver’s throat. “...Theron.”

Whispers spread at the sight of the Champion of Ostagar.

Theron subtly smiled. “Carver. It has been too long.”

“More than ten years,” Carver agreed.

They approached and wrapped an arm around each other, before parting and acknowledging the rest.

“Senior Warden Loghain,” Theron greeted with familiarity, then turned. “Warden...Thom, as I recall. I see you come with company.”

“The Inquisition.” Ellana stepped forward. “A sentient darkspawn called Corypheus has cracked the sky open and manipulated the taint, making all wardens hear the Calling. Through this, his agents have leashed the Orlesian Order of the Grey with their fear and aim to create a demon army out of them. People across southern Thedas have united with the Inquisition to erase Corypheus’ touch from the land, and our current quest is to likewise unite the Wardens.”

As Theron scanned Loghain and Thom’s confirming nods, more wardens could be seen past the doors behind him patrolling the keep with minimal numbers, occasionally peering through the door gap

with unreadable expressions.

Carver motioned for Ellana to stand in front of him. “Inquisitor Ellana of Clan Lavellan, lady Herald of Andraste.”

“Andaran atish’an, lethallan.” Theron warmly held her forearm and nodded. “I am Senior Warden Theron Mahariel, formerly of Clan Siona.”

Ellana briefly blinked before returning, “Ma serannas, lethallin.”

“Come.”

Theron led Ellana’s party into the warden keep as the rest of the Inquisition waited outside. Carver glanced at Ellana, but she silently shook her head. As Ellana’s party followed Theron through the keep’s outer and inner baileys, Carver caught sight of wardens running around the ramparts above and funnelling for the main keep. The party’s arrival may not have surprised the Wardens, but it had evidently stirred up an energy that had long been simmering.

Carver sped up to Ellana’s pace with a whisper. “You’re confused.”

She lowered her voice. “We come as guests to Warden Theron’s home appealing for his people’s help. He has the right to establish himself as my hahren. Yet he set the tone of our discussion as equals — he willingly *discarded* his diplomatic advantage. We now both have equal say in the future of our figurative clans: the Wardens of Soldier’s Peak, and the Inquisition.”

Carver subdued a frown. “Meaning?”

Ellana’s eyes burned a tense green. “He — or whoever sent him to open the doors — doesn’t have the power to speak for the Wardens. But if not them, then who?” She stiffened when it seemed Theron was within earshot of her whispering and spoke at room volume. “I had no idea you knew the Champion of Ostagar, Carver.”

Theron chuckled from ahead, glancing back. “I’m unsurprised to hear it, based on Warden Ellana’s stories. Your humility hasn’t changed, Carver, though you appear more at peace now.”

“I...yes. I am, thank you.” Right, body language. The former halla keeper was always sharp. “Theron, I sent a letter to the Wardens through my cousin a few months ago.”

Theron's lips thinned as he gazed back ahead. "Warden Solona received it and shared your thoughts with us. However, Warden-Commander Duncan and the majority questioned the veracity of your letter. The entirety of it was conjecture."

Carver guiltily acknowledged it. "I'm aware."

"Since then, I'm sure you've noticed that the Wardens have sealed the keep from the outside world — to internally, *hotly* debate whether to trust your letter."

Loghain spoke sternly. "The Wardens here are *fighting*?"

"This place is no different than Montsimmard!" Thom realised.

"We're currently split in opinion." Theron gestured to the main keep's doors, and two wardens standing guard obediently opened them.

"Myself and others are of the same mind as the Warden-Constable, while the rest share the Warden-Commander's hesitance."

Hence the equal terms of address: no one could speak for the Wardens with authority.

"BOOF!"

A mabari suddenly leapt at Carver from the doors, sending him to the ground with a grunt. He awkwardly sat up. "Dog...?"

Ellana and a few others murmured with confused confirmation that the furry mass licking Carver's face was indeed a canine – when suddenly from afar came an excited, "Carver!"

A storm of clanking armour filtered through the main doors as Carver stood up and was beset by another crushing embrace. "Elissa."

The woman laughed, parting from him with a grin. "Well well, everyone look who it is!"

Carver couldn't help a curve of his lips as he greeted Alistair with a hug, and Velanna with a nod who returned it with a familiar, "Shemlen." Elissa convinced Dog to cease scrabbling up at Carver's armour and instead lope about the crowd forming in the main keep's front doors. The Inquisition ascended the steps while Carver gestured.

"Where are Faren, Ruck, and Sigrun?"

Elissa moaned. "They had left with Duren and Oghren to check on

Knotwood Hills before Duncan ordered our doors sealed. They haven't returned since then."

Since their relocation to the surface, Oghren served Duren as a mercenary – though in Gorim's opinion, the berserker was closer to a Second. While Duren received income as a royal – even outside the line of succession – the former prince wrote to his brother strictly about professional, impersonal items such as the maintenance of Kal'Hirol. Beyond the Legion of the Dead, few dwarves loyal to Orzammar could be found assisting Duren with royal tasks, and Gorim was settled in Denerim. Fortunately, Oghren was eager for active work. Bhelen handsomely provided Duren with the necessary materials to support Orzammar from the surface, likely in the hopes to soften Duren's will and convince him to return home, which meant that Duren could pay Oghren well and Oghren could comfortably support his family.

Duren and Oghren also oftentimes checked on Ruck's recovery in Soldier's Peak where Faren updated them on his sister and nephew. The four dwarves were rarely seen far from each other for long periods, and it was no surprise to hear that they had convinced Sigrun to follow them to Kal'Hirol for a routine investigation of darkspawn, likely to also allow Ruck an opportunity to exchange letters with his mother via the Legion of the Dead.

Carver's brows creased. "Knotwood Hills was quiet last I heard from Nathaniel, but I'll check again." He sighed and moved on. "As I've shared with Leliana, here is one less secret about me: my brother, Garrett Hawke."

Alistair spluttered. "There's more of you!?"

Elissa gaped. "Hawke, like from the Tale of the Champion?"

"Exactly so," Carver confirmed, startled when Elissa and Alistair burst out laughing and Theron's lips twitched in amusement.

"Ha!" Elissa guffawed at Garrett. "You are *definitely* Carver's brother."

Carver whiplashed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Dorian blinked at the atmosphere. "Shall we drink to celebrate this reunion——?"

"No!" Elissa and Alistair immediately rejected in horror. "Carver didn't tell you? When we were in Orzammar, he got kicked out of a dwarven

tavern!"

Carver protested. "Hey, I was hardly the only one there."

"You wiped out a criminal syndicate on a drunken rampage!"

"I was just tipsy when I did that — and Wynne started it!"

"You didn't abduct a gangster from the fight and tie him to a chair so Faren could punch his face in?"

Carver grumbled. "...No one likes the Carta anyway."

Varric spluttered. "I'm sorry, *you* were the one who wiped out the Carta in Orzammar?"

"*Paragon* Faren?" Ellana belatedly realised in astonishment.

"Just their headquarters," Carver corrected Varric, "and I'm sure there were leftovers who had crawled to the surface afterwards. Elissa and Alistair, you're dramatising past events."

Velanna snorted. "The dwarf Faren said you once punched a dragon and killed it."

"I punched a dragon, and *then* I killed it!"

Elissa chuckled. "Maybe you should have been drunk when we were fighting the archdemon. Then you would have chopped off more than its leg." She ruffled Carver's hair. "You're even taller now — indeed we've all grown! Hear this, I was promoted to Warden-Constable after Oren's wedding. I'm a 'captain' like you now!"

Velanna grumbled. "It doesn't stop this Order from engaging in nonsense."

The mood dimmed.

Elissa stepped back, straightening into professionalism. "I permitted all of you entry into this keep. However, Warden-Commander Duncan will not meet with you."

"No one's in charge?" Garrett frowned.

"I just left the Warden-Commander's side trying to convince him to see all of you," Elissa sighed. "I'm sorry, but unless he and I agree to take the same action, the Wardens of Soldier's Peak won't move."

Though divided, we all respect Duncan and his wisdom deeply. If you can provide proof that the Calling is fake....”

“What of a warden’s word?” Thom protested. “Where is the faith that each one of us would investigate threats against the Order to the best of our ability?”

Elissa and Alistair’s gazes slid to Loghain with silent hesitation. The former teyrn acknowledged it. “I may not personally deserve your trust, wardens. However, my investigation is supported by Warden Thom’s and Viscount Garrett’s accounts, the latter of whom is brother to someone you’ve trusted with your life before.”

Velanna impatiently snapped at Carver. “Mayhaps *you* would better convince Duncan, shemlen. You and I were in Solona’s party when we encountered the Architect and the Mother. Does this Corypheus resemble either of those talking darkspawn?”

A heavy weight lodged in Carver’s gut. He and Leliana had discussed this. “...The Architect. Corypheus is Ancient Tevene for ‘the conductor.’”

The air burst with shock.

“Then Duncan *must* accept his visitors,” Velanna seethed above the sudden shouting, “regardless of his opinion! The Warden-Commander hesitates to send any of us outside the keep because he’s investigating first if the Calling can be delayed or outright negated.”

Elissa blinked at her in bewilderment. “After Solona and Avernus have already left?”

The plants near Velanna shivered with restraint. “Duncan is investigating through his connection with the Architect. Solona’s party was sworn to secrecy concerning his existence, but I can see now that this demands open communication. Words are a people’s lifeblood, and the Wardens are withering.”

“I’m sorry,” Ellana cut everyone off, “the Wardens are *allied* with a former Magister Sidereal!?”

Carver’s hair rose with the crowd’s tension. “The Architect suffers from amnesia; he has no recollection of his origins and wishes for only peace between darkspawn and the living.”

Thom growled. “And what if he regains his memories!? Surely the

Wardens recognise the danger a sentient darkspawn poses!”

Ellana brooked no argument. “The Wardens are *sworn* to defend Thedas from darkspawn, and they shall not falter when they are called to perform their duty! I demand to see Warden-Commander Duncan, or the *entire Inquisition* will!”

Carver and not a few among Ellana’s companions stared at her gobsmacked at the sudden declaration. As the wardens promptly led the party into the keep, it seemed that the woman best wielded power as a spear. When they finally entered the keep’s war room, Duncan lifted his head from a discussion with senior wardens in surprise at sudden visitors despite his words to Elissa, before collecting himself and opening his mouth.

Ellana cut him off. “You’re in contact with a *talking darkspawn*!?”

Duncan’s gaze fell on Velanna disappointedly. “Velanna—”

“No,” Velanna shut down. “I agreed with you that the Architect and his people would be valuable allies. However, this tradition of *secrecy* in the Order is costing us the world we’re sworn to protect. Now, I don’t give a nug’s foot if some shemlens suffer a darkspawn’s blade before a warden is able to reach them. But if this Conductor manipulates the taint for evil – if he endangers *my sister* – then your command for inaction is my permission to rebel!”

Sera softly murmured, “All of yer are messed *up*.”

Duncan sighed, massaging his temple. Up until Solona and Avernus’ departure for the Anderfels, they had been delaying Duncan’s Calling for as long as they could. Now, the song was likely barraging Duncan to a depth that no warden around him could possibly understand, with or without Corypheus’ manipulation.

“The Conductor?” Duncan tiredly echoed.

Ellana, Loghain, and Garrett shared what they knew, and Duncan in turn reluctantly revealed that he had been keeping in contact with the Architect through tunnels burrowed in the keep’s deepest foundations. Though brambled plants and the like cut off the Deep Roads’ access to the keep, they didn’t prevent sound from carrying; the loophole had allowed Duncan and one of the Architect’s awakened darkspawn – the Messenger – to communicate. While Duncan and the Messenger only contacted each other every two or so months, Duncan could confirm last he had heard that the Architect and the awakened darkspawn had

been – like the wardens in Soldier’s Peak – oblivious to Corypheus’ activities. At the very least, the Architect wasn’t in league with Corypheus. Though the alliance with the Architect was controversial, Duncan couldn’t be swayed from breaking it, instead countering that the Architect might be able to shed light on Corypheus and his blight magic, needless to say what other insights the Architect could bring in the far future. On this, Velanna defended him.

Eventually, the warden-commander dismissed everyone but Elissa and the senior wardens from the war room. After a tense hour of raised voices, banging on the war table, then murmuring, the war room’s doors finally opened and the upper echelon of Ferelden’s warden order trickled out, emotionally exhausted.

Duncan halted at the doors and lifted his chin. “There must always be a warden in Ferelden.”

Carver frowned. “Warden-Commander—”

Duncan turned to Elissa. “Warden-Constable, you will lead the Wardens to Adamant Fortress.”

Elissa froze in shock, paling. Her rank had always meant she would eventually succeed him as warden-commander, but since her enlistment, Duncan’s retirement had always seemed far-off. The fact that the weary Duncan was choosing to remain in Soldier’s Peak while the rest of the Order would charge off into battle meant that her promotion – and Duncan’s end – was not only certain, it had arrived. The warden-commander would hold on to his sanity with both hands for as long as the Wardens were needed outside the keep; once they returned, he would depart for the Deep Roads to die bloody and alone, as was the Warden way.

Behind Elissa, Alistair swallowed back tears. Duncan’s jaw clenched in emotion, his heart softening at the sight of his ward, before he nodded jerkily to Theron. “You will assist her, Senior Warden.”

Recognising the line of succession, Theron solemnly saluted. “Warden-Commander.”

Elissa straightened and turned, her voice leaving her roughly as it thundered throughout the keep. “**Wardens! Arm yourselves! Tomorrow, we march with the Inquisition!**”

Chapter End Notes



Carver has so much to catch others up on, hehe. Fun fact, one of Varric's nicknames for Carver is "Junior" in the games. Anyway—

WE'RE FINALLY HERE! :D

Which is exactly when I need to take a break D:

I know, I know, but IRL has me adjusting priorities for now, so I plan to take this opportunity to rejuvenate my creative muscles before I get back into writing ~40k words a week. I might be gone for a week or a month, it's hard to predict, so look forward to the next chapter (whenever it comes), and thank you for the wonderful reviews!



# Brother

## Chapter Notes

### I'M BACK

The storm doesn't look to be passing anytime soon IRL, but I honestly need a chance to de-stress. So I'm finding a slice of time to write again! Updates won't be weekly anymore though, maybe monthly? We'll see. I at least have the plot written out all the way through the end of DAI, so it's just a matter of fleshing out character interactions and bridging events I have in mind together. Writing non-linearly is rough :(

On the bright side, I found another *beautiful* Lavellan [artwork](#) that I style Ellana after.

I've also received a few questions regarding Someone Else's sexuality, and honestly they're still a little too messed up inside to approach that question. I still don't know if I'm going to pair them with anyone. That said, if you're uncomfortable with LGBTQ themes, this fic might not be for you. I mean, it's Dragon Age. I'll also add this heads-up in the first chapter's A/N as a fair notice. (And I hear you guys about Someone Else and Zevran! They are pretty wholesome. I'll add them to my considerations.)

Thanks for the patience and support, my little teapots! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Between sips of water, Carver willed his sigh to not burst into a mortified groan.

The Inquisition and the Grey Wardens of Soldier's Peak were camping along a minor highway cutting through the Dales towards the Western Approach, resting for the night before they'd resume moving at dawn. They had been marching for days, yet it was hard to resent sleeping under a night sky that stretched overhead like a tapestry of stars crowned by a crescent moon, reflected by the Inquisition and Wardens' multitudinous campfires and torchlight below. The comparison was merited. Cullen and the Inquisition's main forces had joined Ellana and Elissa's parties at Skyhold where everyone had expeditiously proceeded west for Adamant Fortress, and if not for Elissa and Josephine's work west of the Frostbacks, Orlais' warring

citizens would have reacted explosively to the wilful march of two armies across no man's land.

Instead, on the way, the Inquisition and Wardens had passed through Emprise du Lion and the Exalted Plains — one of the two places bursting with good opinions of Carver, none of which he needed his warden friends and *especially* Garrett to hear. Elissa, Theron, and Ellana had already bonded over the realisation that Carver had saved each of their lives before, or at least that was how they had introduced their connection to him. The fact had been Theron's answer to how he knew Carver, to which the other two had followed. Despite Carver's wishes, he had a feeling the soldiers under him in the Inquisition would also let slip overblown opinions of their captain to his friends and Garrett.

The possibility was real. To beat reason into the Orlesian Wardens, the Inquisition's army and the Fereldan Wardens *were* marching "together," but their train of soldiers was segmented like an earthworm to readily enter battle formation once they arrived at Adamant Fortress. The armies' best led by Theron, Loghain, and Maker's Breath had the front to besiege the fortress walls, followed by Xanthe's ring of trebuchets, while the Chargers, the armies' lightest troops, and the reserves took the rear. In the middle of the train were the armies' heaviest forces that would hit in two main waves. Carver, Miadahl, and Lilou's soldiers had the first, while the armies' commanders – Cullen, and Elissa as *de facto* – had the second.

Lieutenant-Commander Rylen remained in Skyhold to oversee the Inquisition's security in Cullen's absence, while Ellana was comparatively free to wander the first wave's segments of the train with her closest companions and Garrett. Thus, the prime time for Carver's connections to chat was at night, when Elissa and Alistair could sneak over to the first wave's camp.

Partially composed of Carver's soldiers.

Babysitting his brother and unique friends during camp was unquestionably necessary.

"Gossip is a sin," Carver intoned. He was ignored.

"What really happened during the Blight?" Ellana's eyes glittered. "I'm sure Leliana's songs are exaggerated. Right?"

Elissa and Alistair guffawed from where they sat around a campfire. "Oh, Carver *did* down an undead army with one hand."

Carver frowned. “It was a *smite*, and they *fell* down, they didn’t die.”

“Oho?” Garrett prodded from the other side of the fire, sensing dirt. “You smited an entire army?”

“I’ve seen him do that.” Ellana perked up. “We were fighting Magister Gereon and his demons in Redcliffe’s dark future.”

Elissa and Alistair blinked at the unique combination of words flowing in the same sentence.

Garrett shot up to search for a casket of ale, cackling. “This sounds like a story to be heard over drinks!”

He tossed an impish look at Carver, who merely sipped his waterskin, smug, as the present wardens suddenly made known their new rules regarding all Hawkes. One upside to three of Carver’s lives overlapping was the wardens’ ban of alcohol against Carver extending to Garrett, just to be safe. The famed patron of the Hanged Man gaped at the unfair decision — a sight that fuelled one of Carver’s rare moments of silent amusement. However, when the stories thrown around the fire began to bulldoze Carver’s censorship attempts with *growing success*, he pathetically fled to find sleep instead of staying up late gossiping. They still had another day’s worth of marching. Carver would see who’d be laughing in the morning.

Just to ensure that no one would try to engage him in further conversation, Carver mulishly planted himself at a small campfire claimed by Bull. Aside from the Chargers and sexually adventurous people, no one else in the Inquisition or among the Wardens had the guts or desire to chat up a qunari alone at night. With the exception of Ellana’s other companions, of course, but they were currently spreading their bedrolls out around other campfires. Bull’s was blessedly socially distanced from the main crowd.

Bull and Carver weren’t *awkward*. Bull was a paid extrovert who needed space to covertly write his super secret spy letters when necessary.

Carver just had an insufferable older brother.

“Ser Carver.”

Carver turned where he sat on his bedroll spread before the fire, startling up to his feet as if cold water had splashed over him. “Teyrn.”

Loghain softly grunted. “Not for a long time, as you know.”

Regret panged through Carver, but he didn’t apologise. “...A natural fate. I only wish you hadn’t made me the instrument of its execution.”

Loghain’s eyes shone in the firelight, unreadable as always. “Congratulations on your captaincy.”

It wasn’t the reaction Carver had been expecting. He had forgotten how it sounded to hear praise from his former commander, someone he had always mentally partnered with Ser Cauthrien, and sudden emotion swelled in his throat despite a rough swallow. They hadn’t spoken for years, had been perfectly professional up until this point. Why ambush Carver once he was as alone as one would find him?

Why was it easy to slip back ten years?

“Teyrn, I—” Speech became a struggle. “...Thank you.”

Loghain resumed his stroll past Carver, briefly touching shadows in his way of recognising a soldier. “Senior Warden.”

The light reprimand gently blanketed the campfire’s mood with Loghain’s lasting presence. Carver returned to his bedroll and watched dancing flames.

Silence stretched before Bull placed his writing tools aside from his lap. “Chatty man.”

“My former commander,” Carver felt the need to explain himself, deflating, “but you already knew that.”

“You secretly investigated him for possible treachery,” Bull deduced. Of course he did, considering the Qun grasped the value of military police. Carver’s suspicion of his superior was inappropriate in southern Thedas, unworthy of any role. In Seheron or Par Vollen, Carver would have been called a priest. “Meanwhile, he views you from a paternal perspective. ...You didn’t know?”

Carver had not. To his understanding, Loghain behaved reticent and frank in equal measure. Any opinion he might have had of Carver beyond the professional likely centred on their similarities at a certain age, and how one might expose Carver to improved experiences. Carver conceded that the thought alone was quite fatherly.

“I deeply respect him,” Carver answered, “and also – just a little – fear

him.” Not unlike a qunari’s feelings towards their tamassran. Carver retrieved his waterskin and soothed his swollen throat. “I suppose the filial tinge in our relationship isn’t one-sided.”

Tonight was apparently the night of reflecting on twisted parental relationships. Carver had even caught Fiona frequently staring at Alistair when she thought no one was looking — which meant that Bull had definitely noticed, and Cole was about to toss his brand of awkwardness into that drama soon. Carver had yet to find the heart to intervene. Well, at least it appeared that Cole was running his idea by Dog first. Those two had bonded quickly. Through barking.

Bull drew his attention back. “What are you thinking about?”

Carver hummed. “How Cole and the Arishok share something in common.”

Elissa suddenly dropped down on the ground next to Carver’s bedroll, a mug of dark liquid splashing in her hand. The smell cut through Carver’s thoughts like a sneeze. His eyes watered as he cursed Garrett’s silver tongue when the former mercenary felt like exercising it, meaning now only *Carver* was banned from strong drinks like the rot-gut in Elissa’s cup. Hopefully Garrett was flat on his rear like the uninhibited tosspot he was, already regretting his decisions if sleep hadn’t claimed him.

“What’s a kadan?” Elissa hiccuped.

Bull tilted his head, likely surprised to hear the term far south of his home and unprompted from a foreigner’s mouth. “It’s an all-purpose qunlat term for a person one cares about – in whom ‘one’s heart resides.’ A romantic interpretation of kadan is reflected in a dragon tooth split in half and worn as matching necklaces between two people.”

“Oh, uh...” Elissa tipsily pointed at Carver, “I was asking him.”

Carver facepalmed. “Bull, before you think anything, allow me to say that the Warden isn’t racist.” Despite the fact that out of context, Elissa had seemingly asked someone outside the Qun to explain its culture.

The brow above Bull’s good eye quirked. “Okay....”

“Because Sten called you that,” Elissa continued to Carver, slurring, “and before that, it was karasten, and before that, karashok. You’re

the best,” Elissa stated non sequitur, seemingly pivoting to a separate topic. “In general. But also to ask regarding the others from our party during the Blight.”

Carver stared at his waterskin, vainly willing its contents into wine or the night sky into day. “Leliana is better.”

“How’s Sten?” Elissa bulldozed.

Carver surrendered with a groan. “...Actually, it’s Arishok now.”

“Ha!” Elissa’s drink sloshed as she solemnly raised it. “To growing up!”

A pointed look past the woman quickly summoned Alistair from his campfire with gentle, herding hands, marginally more sober. “Come, my rose, let’s refill your cup with something less strong. We still have a march ahead of us....”

Carver sipped his water as Bull watched the pair vanish into the crowd and campfires started to go out for the night. The direction of Bull’s one-eyed gaze meant little when a bred spy like him could see with his peripheries.

“Ebasit bas-raas.”

“I’m not a qunari.”

“That’s what I said.” Bull met Carver’s gaze. “You aren’t of the Qun, yet at the same time, even a basalit-an can’t be a kadan.”

“I’ve met my brother,” Carver snorted, then solemnly sighed. “You said so yourself; a kadan is a person, a *whom* — not a what. Not ‘qunari’ or ‘bas.’ Sharing one’s heart with someone isn’t the same as joining a greater living body.”

Bull’s eye flicked to Carver’s chest where there was no dragon tooth necklace.

One couldn’t reason that a sexual drive, or thinking with one’s dick, had drawn Arishok to Carver. It didn’t matter that Arishok as Sten had spent nearly a year away from Seheron, in a blight, with no means of “de-stressing” as Bull would call it and as Sten had once before with Zevran. It mattered less that in the beginning, Sten had been depressed, partially suicidal, and definitely not in the mind space to even feel horny. The fact was that Arishok placed his heart in Carver’s

hands not to be repaid in kind, but to simply share it with someone he trusted whole-heartedly.

The ashkaari who had found his sword, Asala. The karashok then karasten who had fought alongside him through battlefields like the Deep Roads. The one whom he'd never want to find opposite of a Qunari invasion, else Arishok would be forced to cut down his heart with his soul.

It was hard not to cherish a friend like him, even across a distance. Carver would impulsively send presents to Arishok whenever he was reminded of the qunari: paintings, cookie recipes — nearly a kitten once, but even Carver's connections hadn't been able to find a safe way to deliver it. The two of them rarely exchanged letters. Besides political matters, there wasn't much needed to be said between them.

Unattended, the fire began to die, softening the edges of Bull's features and lowering a dark veil over them. "What you two share is a meaningful relationship?"

"One of my longest," Carver confirmed.

He settled in his bedroll and pretended not to know that the angle of where Bull sat pointed to where Dorian shared a fire with the rest of Ellana's companions. Carver's relationship with Arishok was proof that a qunari could share a deep bond with someone outside of the Qun that wasn't defined by sex. Take away Bull's physical compatibility with Dorian, and the spy would be left only with how Dorian made him feel in his heart.

The qunari might not have grown aware of it, and Carver could be relying on certain knowledge, but Bull had already fallen hard. When it was serving the Qun or serving his heart on a platter, Bull never did anything halfway. In a certain timeline where he was forced to sacrifice the Chargers for an alliance between the Qun and the Inquisition, his heart would have turned numb from suffering a dozen deaths by the time he was called to kill the Inquisitor and their allies, including Dorian. Whether or not Bull was romanced by the Inquisitor, in every ending where Bull died for the Qun, his death was punctuated with a fallen dragon tooth necklace.

In every ending where Bull hadn't fallen in love with the Inquisitor, it had been with Dorian.

As a quiet fell over camp, Alistair stealthily ambled over to Carver's side, passingly nodding once to Bull who had the first watch.



“Hey Carver,” Alistair whispered, “it’s been a while since we all...well, Elissa and Dog are tucked in but not down like logs. The last time any of us camped outside was more than ten years ago. If you have no plans tonight...”

“Alistair,” Carver emphasised.

“Do you want to sleep together?”

The request deeply moved Carver. While they had spent a little under a year facing mortal dangers and uncertainty together, Carver hadn’t expected his old companions to feel attached to him, much less attach a sense of safety to him.

He also hadn’t expected Garrett’s whispered interruption.

“*Who* wants to sleep with *who*?”

Carver and Alistair shared a look before understanding dawned on them. Where the basically married man reddened in mortification, Carver rose from his bedroll with calm mischief.

“You should be passed out, Garrett.”

Kirkwall’s esteemed viscount twitched where he laid sprawled in bushes between Alistair’s and Bull’s campfires, nauseous from drinking too much. “Well I’m awake *now*.”

“*Good night*, Garrett.”

X

A full day after Garrett’s decision to drink ad nauseam, where the armies’ first wave now stood in a shivering desert night while anticipating their turn to leap into battle, Carver ignored the nearby siege of Adamant Fortress to acknowledge Cullen. To their side grumped a mildly hungover Garrett with crossed beefy arms.

“This is revenge, isn’t it.” Garrett had to raise his voice to be heard over the armies’ trebuchets and fervent conflict.

Carver didn’t mirror Garrett’s pose. The soldiers around them were triggered to charge upon Carver’s raised hand. “In my professional opinion, you’re best stationed at the back with the mages and other light troops.”

“Who was it who killed the Arishok?” Garrett pointed out, amending,

“—The previous one? I’m a heavy hitter! Cullen, *you* know me.”

“I do,” Cullen groaned, turning. “Carver, he *is* skilled.”

Garrett deadpanned. “*He* is also the older brother.”

Weariness wrinkled Cullen’s brow despite the fact he had still brought Garrett to Carver once the older Hawke had protested his placement, per Carver’s suggestion. “Carver’s military experience far outstrips yours or mine, Hawke. I wouldn’t have grown into this position without Carver’s advice from the start. *Additionally*,” Cullen stressed, lowering his voice, “you undermine him in front of his troops like this.”

Garrett looked around with a blink, self-aware. “That’s not what I—”

**CRASH!**

An approving roar swept up the desert as Xanthe’s trebuchets finally broke the Orlesian Wardens’ defence. It was time for the first wave.

Carver clicked his tongue. “*Stick with my soldiers*,” he demanded. “We’re going to clear the battlements. Leave the main fortress to *Ellana, Elissa, and her wardens*.”

“Yes, Mother,” Garrett quipped just as Carver raised his hand.

**“Charge!”**

Miadahl and Lilou’s own orders rippled from Carver’s left and right, quickly swallowed by the answering cry of battle as Carver and his soldiers rushed into the fortress. Theron’s forces had perfectly cleared a route to the battlements, and Summer Sword flashed with the demise of countless demons and their warden company opposing Carver’s slow advancement. The Orlesian Order gave their foes no chance to defend themselves. Magister Livius Erimond’s manufactured fear had thoroughly, completely stolen all reason from the wardens and reduced them into lizard brains computing only “us” and “them.” Despite Theron’s pass through the area, the Orlesian wardens had simply seen him and his wardens as enemies to their goal of hunting down the remaining Old Gods. If anything, the *Fereldan Wardens* were the traitors.

Garrett was the first to spot Orlesian wardens brokenly waiting out the siege.

“We deserve death,” a warden’s voice cracked. “It’s treason, but we just can’t become demons for the Order.”

Carver stiffened with building rage at the situation. “You thought to delay your participation in the ritual by taking post in the battlements.”

“Then we spotted the Fereldan Order,” the wardens confirmed, “our brothers whom we fought alongside and shed blood with in the Fifth Blight, and Warden-Commander Clarel...she saw the foreign army with them. *Refused* to open the doors.” Heads drooped. “We never wanted this fight.”

Garrett cursed. “I’m starting to hate warden-commanders....”

Carver turned to his lieutenant. “We’re here to stop Magister Livius’s rituals, not kill wardens.”

Speechless nodded from over Carver’s shoulder and passed on the command, when the battlements suddenly fissured and erupted with fire. A squad of Carver’s soldiers fell to their deaths or were instantly killed with echoing startled cries.

**SHRIIEEEEK!**

Carver shoved Speechless down with him to the ground as Corypheus’ dragon rushed past overhead. A flash of magic in Carver’s periphery confirmed Garrett’s survival,

—And immediate pursuit of the flying beast, *that altruistic idiot!*

“*Garrett!*” Carver roared, heart leaping to his throat.

No, not him, *please* O Maker. *Ellana* could go, she’d be able to survive, but not Garrett.

“Evacuate the battlements!” Carver tossed back to Speechless. “Fall back to Commander Cullen!”

Carver charged after Garrett’s vanishing figure – tracking him through the rescued soldiers and wardens Carver passed by, and the lightning bolts stitching the air between the dragon and Garrett’s moving position. The spells suddenly ceased when the dragon pivoted and crash-landed on the fortress’ enceinte with a snap of its jaws.

**BOOM!**

Carver rounded a corner with a smite ready, only to be beaten to it by a burst of lightning from Clarel. Carver ignored Livius's nearby corpse to grab the warden-commander by the arm and fling her back just as the precarious ground beneath the dragon suddenly fell. The massive beast screeched, having wasted its breath on the fortress and now lacking the gas to spring off with buoyancy. Its claws vainly caught on crumbling stone.

*"Garrett!"* Carver cried out, spotting figures fleeing the dragon's underside.

Ellana, Elissa, and Dog booked it for Carver and Clarel's end of the fortress walls while Garrett reached for Carver's outstretched hand. Whatever battle that had drawn the party, Clarel, and Livius to Adamant's cliffside, it would end in a pyrrhic victory if the Inquisition, Wardens, and Kirkwall's leaders all simultaneously died.

Carver grasped Garrett's hand just as the ground fell out from under him.

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*"Bloody idiot!"* Carver cried out with a shove. "You aren't supposed to be here!"

Garrett stumbled back, alarmed. "What's the big deal?"

The nightmare demon's realm in the Fade towered around Carver, Garrett, Ellana, Elissa, and Dog as a steep, craggy landscape. It was hard to tell where patches of stone ruins ended and jagged obsidian began. Cauldrons, unmade beds, tables – objects of terrified dreamers littered the Fade, lasting for as long as the fear sustaining them: of destiny, shadows, and monsters. In the perilous domain seemingly cut from darkness, a viscous cold washed over cliffs and puddled into endless liquid seas. The only light was green veins webbing through every piece of dark rock, and the twisting blanket of green fire overhead resembling the Breach at its most unrestrained. Even then, it was difficult to see. The light constantly wavered in dimension and

brightness, and the thinnest veins resembled the Mark's subtle mirage on Ellana's hand.

Goosebumps erupted across Elissa's exposed skin. "The big deal might be the fact we're in the *Fade*?"

"Not as I've experienced it," Garrett grumbled.

Ellana nodded in agreement as a fellow mage, contemplating. "The huge demon was right on the other side of that rift Livius was using." She stood up with a wince, then nodded at where the twisting sky touched down on a dark peak. "In our world, the rift was in the main hall. Maybe we can escape the same way."

Carver stalked ahead with a tight grip on Summer Sword.

"Carver," Ellana began, when Garrett cut in.

"Seriously, brother." Garrett caught up. "I'm a big boy, I can handle a trip to the Fade."

"Physically?" Carver pointed out, before sharply exhaling. He had to remain cool. The party's lives were in his hands. "Forget it. No one leap into combat without warning me first. There might be more than that 'huge demon' creeping around here."

A hand rested on Carver's shoulder, and he sharply turned only to see Ellana. "The burden of our survival is a team effort. Don't carry it alone."

She didn't understand – no one did.

"Aww!" Elissa slapped Carver's back as she took the lead. "This might be the first time you've behaved like a kid in front of me!"

"I'm not scared," Carver refuted.

"No one's saying you are," Ellana consoled, "and you're right to suggest we tread lightly...."

The party slowed in shock at the sight of a figure draped in the Divine's vestments standing at the edge of a puddle. The elderly woman glowed with a gentle smile.

Garrett glanced at Ellana and Elissa. "By *huge demon*, did you mean a little old lady?"

Elissa shot him a look. "That's Divine Justinia."

"Or a spirit imitating her," Ellana allowed. "Solas says spirits turn into demons when corrupted of their meaning, but are otherwise helpful. If this one hinders our escape from the Fade, then it might be a demon." She stopped before the mysterious Divine. "Name yourself."

"I am here to help," the Divine serenely answered. "I can be Divine Justinia if you wish, but we would waste time conclusively deciding this when you have more pressing matters. You can't remember what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes." She gestured to the patches of ruins climbing up to the rift. "The memories were consumed by the demon that serves Corypheus. It is the Nightmare you forget upon waking, growing fat upon terror, and now frightening the Grey Wardens with a false Calling."

Elissa growled. "I would gladly avenge the insult this Nightmare dealt my brethren."

"You'll have your chance, brave warden," the Divine replied and looked at Ellana. "This dark place is its lair. You cannot escape it without recovering your memories scattered throughout here."

"Sounds like a waste of time," Garrett mumbled. "Exactly what a demon would want – us here, trapped forever."

"No," Carver regretted the words as they left him, "she might be right. Two rifts close to each other in the real world don't necessarily lead to the same place in the Fade. It matters little that Livius was dragging a Nightmare into the main hall before Clarel, Ellana, and Elissa chased him down." Dog barked. "Along with Dog. The fact is, Ellana opened a rift to save us from a fall, and of any place we could've landed in, it's somewhere personal for her. Specifically where her lost memories dwell."

"Meaning they're our key to escape," Ellana concluded, biting her lip. She glanced at Justinia, then Carver. "I'm trusting you."

Carver would die protecting her. He knew better than to voice it.

The party trekked crumbling steps and arches while Justinia trailed behind and Ellana approached wandering wisps of warm, yellow light. With each embrace, Ellana's broken memories of the conclave explosion filled their minds. Confusion and betrayal etched across her face when she witnessed herself grab Corypheus' orb just before the mountainside exploded.

“This mark is – an *accident*?” Ellana breathed, clutching her hand. “A random ricochet in the middle of a fight? Creators help me, neither the Maker nor Andraste were involved in this at all! I’m just—”

“Woah,” Elissa intervened with raised hands. “The Fereldan Order didn’t ally with you on a whim, Inquisitor. I fear the Maker as much as the next woman, but you and your people have a special faith. If you believe in Him just a *little* of how much I think you do, then you believe He made this world and everything in it – including your accident.”

“I trust the Maker,” Ellana’s voice wobbled, shrinking, “and Mythal watches over the People. However treacherous the path might seem, the Maker and Mythal have always carried me through difficulty...as they will through this.”

Carver watched her as she straightened. “What’s the harm in having faith in yourself?”

She sent him a delicate smile. “That would be too lonely—”

“*Down!*” Carver shouted, cutting past her with Summer Sword.

A rippling veil of spiders launched from the walls and cliffs surrounding the party in an ambush. Venom splashed against Elissa’s shield while Carver bisected an oversized spider between its many eyes before it could tear Ellana’s head off. Garrett managed to throw up arcane shields over himself but failed to find sturdy footing, and tumbled down ruined stairs with a spider’s fangs caught around his staff. He grunted, straining with a spider on top of him, before Ellana drew a curtain of flames across the beast and lit it on fire. Garrett kicked the spider off of himself and beheaded it with a flick of his spear-tipped staff. Dog tore appendages off another spider before it could ambush him.

There were too many. Ellana’s flared emotions must have exposed their presence to the Nightmare, and now a swarm of its children were flooding down the temple’s ruins.

Carver’s own fear of losing anyone seemed to empower the spiders against him, though he also couldn’t seem to swing Summer Sword with his usual finesse. Panic was seizing him. Arishok would have been disappointed in his performance.

For some reason, the thought made Carver’s sword feel lighter.

Suddenly, the assault of seemingly countless spiders ended from further up the ruins, behind the spiders' attack. Wild, steely slashes shredded through without a care of growing tired, until finally the horde thinned and the party caught its breath.

"You have *no idea* how it hurts to be ignored by Daddy Long Legs just 'cause you aren't a hot item!"

A lanky young man stood up from behind the last dissipating spider, hefting an obsidian greatsword up over his shoulder guard to rest. The Fade's green touch was shot throughout the weapon's length — but what caught Carver's breath were the figure's scuffed knees. Tousled hair.

And light blue eyes, more sky than electric.

"Hiya, Carv," the young man chirped. "It took a while to find my way here, but thankfully lots of people remember the conclave explosion — and lots of people have nightmares about it. This place is nearly as popular as where spirits of compassion like to hang out!"

Someone else gaped. "Carver?"

The original Carver grinned. "Looks like this time, *I* saved *your* life."

## Chapter End Notes

Baby boy has arrived! Teehee~ Anyway, here's a longer than usual A/N for a longer than usual chapter!

### **!Game spoilers ahead!**

The bit about Bull/Dorian as a game default is just my speculation. Traitor!Bull's death always has a dragon tooth necklace in the Trespasser epilogue even when the Inquisitor doesn't romance him. I interpret this as Bull's heart residing in Dorian when it's not in the Inquisitor — which means Bull canonically keeps his unrequited crush to his grave because who outside of the Qun would understand the significance of him owning a dragon tooth necklace, anyway. So long as Dorian doesn't want Bull, or is happy with the Inquisitor, Bull doesn't have to force how seriously he feels about Dorian on him. Sharing a split dragon tooth necklace is how a qunari "shows their commitment," not establishes it.

Cole says "I didn't feel it. There wasn't any pain," regarding Bull's



acceptance of this and transition back as a full-time Hissrad – his Qunari nickname meaning “liar,” which the Viddasala calls him. To feel no pain fighting his heart to death, Bull is an expert liar even to himself.

One could argue that Bull is instead always serious about the Inquisitor, not Dorian, but I guess we’ll never know. So long as you don’t romance Bull, he won’t tell you what a dragon tooth necklace means :(

On that happy note - **!End of game spoilers!**

The Qunlat adjective “-raas” means “nothing,” as in a mathematical negative — noticeably in “maraas,” meaning *nothing, alone*, or when paired with “-toh,” *disappear*. “Bas” means “thing,” as in something purposeless and thus foreign to the Qun – in essence, a theological nothing.

In this fic, Bull’s “ebasit bas-raas” roughly translates to “you’re something with an absence of purposeless-ness,” a paradox where Carver should technically be of the Qun but isn’t. Trust Bull, a member of the Qunari priesthood, to succinctly capture Carver’s existence in two words. I see a lot of interpretations that highlight Bull’s ability to read people – down to people’s kinks, which says something about his skill – and to give it as good as he gets in battle, but imho there isn’t enough content digging into the mind behind his spycraft. He’s *so bloody cool*.

I need more Ben-Hassrath!Bull content, can you tell?

# Cuckoo

## Chapter Notes

A bit of a longer chapter here. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Someone else instantly sheathed their sword and ran to embrace Carver. “I didn’t know when I’d see you again!”

“Oof,” Carver laughed, dropping his own sword into a sheath over his shoulder and squeezing back. Dog danced around them, excited that someone else was excited. Carver freed a hand to pet him once. “I figured it’d be easier for you to spot me if I looked the same as last time.”

“You haven’t aged a day,” someone else marvelled. “Where did you find armour and a sword?”

Carver shrugged. “I borrowed the shoulder and chest pieces from one of Garrett’s dreams and made them mine. Then when I found my way here, I picked up a chunk of rock and thought it into a sword. Wicked, right?”

Garrett suddenly cut in with a gesture. “Back away, Carver, that might be a demon.”

“Garrett.” Someone else parted from the hug and turned, nervous. “Wait. This is actually your real brother...Carver.”

Said youth waved. “Yeah, I rolled over as a babe and nearly died once, if Carv here hadn’t slipped into my body and sustained it since then. You might remember me from your dreams where we chat. Hopefully our conversation will stick *this* time.”

Garrett’s brows furrowed, a sharp emotion etching itself into his face. “Seriously, Carver, this is the last time for jokes. You’re...you’re lying!”

Someone else raised a placating hand. “I’m sorry, Garrett, I never meant for any of this to happen. I don’t even know how exactly I ended up in Carver’s body, but I’ve been meaning to find a solution – and to tell you, Mother, and Bethany. I just haven’t found a way around safely delivering the news. I’ve been...scared.”

Garrett's gaze swirled with growing horror and agony. His voice left him in a whisper. "You're telling the truth." His volume rose. "Maker, you're telling the truth. My *baby brother* has been stuck here while I've been growing up with – a lie! An abomination!"

Carver intervened. "No, Carv's a real person who was passing away before they found me!"

"How do we know that isn't another lie!?" Garrett spat at someone else, furious. "You know what we call people like you? *Demons!*"

Elissa stepped in. "Perhaps we should lower our voices...."

"And our emotions," Ellana agreed, glancing around. "The Nightmare will sense us."

"That bastard already *knows* we're here!" Garrett threw his arms up. Dog flattened to the ground, whimpering at the raised voices. "I might as well address the fact that this *parasite* screwed up my family! You've been pretending to be my brother *all this time!*"

Carver stood between them. "Stop it, Garrett, he's my friend."

"You're a *child*." Garrett's voice broke at the same time as his will. He visibly crumbled. "You don't know any better. Maker, what do I tell Mother? *Bethany*? Her other half since birth was a cuckoo's egg all along. And Father *died* never knowing."

Someone else's eyes burned with emotion that they vainly smothered. "You're upset. You have every right to be. I'll take full responsibility for the repercussions of my existence, but we have to leave this place first."

"Coward." Garrett scowled.

"He wants to help us escape," Ellana pointed out calmly. "He can't be a demon. We should keep moving."

While the party continued their ascent of the temple's ruins, Garrett sullenly followed, either glaring at or completely ignoring someone else. When Garrett didn't care to watch someone else's back during a spider ambush and nearly cost the party a member, Elissa groaned.

"You need to grow up."

"What?" Garrett hissed.

"You can't choose who you're stuck with as a child," Elissa reasoned. "Isn't that what family *is*? Besides, if you love Carver like I do, then you know his history speaks for itself. He's awkward and *awful* at communication. Awful."

Someone else sighed. "I'm *sorry*."

"But," Elissa continued, "he's also one of the bravest, smartest, and most principled people you'll ever meet."

"Would someone with principles lie their entire life?" Garrett returned. "I grant you this: the leech *is* smart. Only the guilty have something to hide from innocent people like my family, and he did exactly that until his sins were impossible to conceal."

"You feel betrayed," Ellana acknowledged. "Still, shouldn't we consider Carver's unusual circumstance?"

"And sweep what we don't like under the rug?" Garrett seethed. "Should we dismiss the consequences of the fake Carver's actions out of convenience? What gives *you* the right to pass judgement? Or *him*?" A finger jabbed someone else's way. "I know it all: that he's the first to leap into a fight for someone, and yet will flee from a pretty girl, from attention, and apparently from a promotion. But the fact is you can't call him Carver anymore." Garrett wilted. "No one can. My real brother is a figure from my dreams I can barely remember."

*"Did you think you mattered, Garrett?"* the Nightmare's voice reverberated from slanted, black rock and trickling cold. The very air the party breathed was its domain. *"No one needs you. They know they don't. You couldn't cure your father with the gift of magic he gave you; you couldn't protect Bethany from being sent to the Circle; and you'll never make your mother happy by yourself. Your own brother likes a stranger more than you. Fenris will regret joining your family."*

Garrett growled. "Now I miss the spiders."

Ellana blinked. "You mean wolves."

"Wolves?" Elissa's head whipped around. "Where?"

"We're in Nightmare's domain," Carver provided. "Fearlings, the lesser demons who serve him, manifest in forms you fear."

Elissa side-eyed Ellana. "Spiders are scarier than wolves."

“Not black wolves,” the elven woman defended. “They’re not often encountered near civilization, but they’re as ferocious as bears and just as smart. I’ve fought a pack that was possessed by a terror demon before.”

Someone else hesitantly spoke up. “Elissa meant giant spiders like the ones you’d find in the Deep Roads.”

“I actually saw *smaller* spiders,” the warden slowly began, “but now that you mention it, the Deep Roads beneath Orzammar are the worst. Oh no,” she grabbed someone else’s shoulders, “what if we see a *broodmother* next!?”

Someone else flinched in disgust, shaking his head. “Ugh, no we won’t! Don’t suggest it!”

“What’s a broodmother?”

The entire party turned to Carver. “Nothing you need to know.”

The young man petulantly pushed. “Oh please, I *have* wandered Mum, Garrett, and Bethany’s dreams before. I know what the human mind’s like unfiltered.”

“And you’ll live your *entire life* not knowing what a broodmother is,” someone else stated. “Seriously, Carver, curiosity killed the cat. This isn’t the Fade; you can’t just dig up memories or meaning from rocks.”

Carver smirked. “Technically, we *are* in the Fade?”

Garrett grumbled. “Alright, smartass.”

“Language!”

The route to the domain’s highest peak wound around it, up and over temple ruins still quietly majestic despite their state. Ellana retrieved more of her floating memories in the Nightmare’s lair before she relived the moment she fell out of the Fade in Haven, and the party as one glanced back to where Divine Justinia trailed behind them. The woman nearly floated on her feet due to her long gown, but it had grown increasingly clear that her pace was unnatural. The silhouette previously mistaken for Andraste in Ellana’s fall clearly matched Justinia’s.

Garrett’s hand strayed to his staff. “You’re no lady, then; you might even be a demon working for Corypheus.”

Justinia met his gaze. “If you believe that, then strike me down.”

Garrett stared before his gaze fell, his hand quietly dropping.

“The Divine is truly dead,” Ellana murmured with regret. “All that remains of her is a spirit inspired by her character, lingering in darkness to help me regain my memories instead of passing on. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you...her.”

“If you wish to see it that way,” Justinia replied. “There are worse places for one to spend their waking moments.”

Elissa scrunched her nose. “*Are* you the Divine?”

Justinia merely smiled, before her features and priestly vestments burned away for a brilliant golden figure glowing like Ellana’s lost memories. The figure levitated from the ground to rise higher, its head turning to keep watch for an ambush of fearlings.

Garrett hesitantly nudged Carver. “Can *you* do that?”

Carver elbowed him back.

“Hurry,” Justinia urged. “You’ve regained your memories, but the Nightmare now knows your movement points to the rift. I will erect barriers ahead to shield you from its direct hostility. You must contend with the fearlings yourself.”

Dog leapt after Justinia’s floating form in a chase, pinning down fearlings in the way to tear at their spindly bodies. The party hastened as the sea of spiders ambushing them began to swell to an impossible strength.

Someone else watched Carver’s figure worriedly. “You should know: Compassion is in the waking world now as a boy named Cole. He might be presently suffering from amnesia, but he’s proof that a creature from the Fade can independently take physical shape in the waking world.”

“Compassion!” Carver brightened, turning to Garrett. “They watched over me in the Fade while I grew up. Feynriel and I were wondering where they went. Right – I also know Feynriel, by the way.”

Garrett grumbled. “At least you have friends.”

“Since Carver isn’t a spirit,” someone else continued, “but a soul, I’m

sure if he passes through the rift, his identity won't be warped and he'll become physically 'real.'"

"Darn," Carver chuckled someone else's way, hopeful. "I better remember to imagine myself taller than you before hopping through that rift, then."

Someone else couldn't muster equal amusement. According to certain veins of Andrastianism, souls passed through the Fade before passing away. After slipping into Carver's body before the boy could die, someone else had been cut off from the Fade while Carver had been cut off from his body. This meant that if they both travelled through the rift and Carver manifested his own body, someone else wouldn't have an assured grasp of their body anymore. Their inability to pass into the Fade and beyond even after exhausting their body to death — like in Ostagar — would disappear.

They would finally be able to work themselves to death.

Strange, how fragile one could feel despite having already died once. Fear didn't lessen with repeated exposure.

*"I am the veiled hand of Corypheus himself!"* the Nightmare's spite rumbled through the Fade as one inescapable voice. *"The demon army you fear? I command it. They are bound all through me!"*

Justinia calmly neutralised its mental attack. "Ah, so if we banish you, we banish the demons and your enslavement of warden mages in the waking world? Thank you, every fear come to life."

Towering stone finally fell away to a treacherous peak where Livius' incomplete rift threaded the ground and sky together. An inhumanly tall, bony figure turned at the party's arrival with a hiss, twitching with tentacles replacing its face and spider legs stretching out from its spine. Somehow, the image tossed someone else's mind back to when they had faced the Mother, and nauseous fear pitted in their stomach. Intellectually, they knew that they were facing an Aspect of the Nightmare, an appendage of the ravenous demon that could move and operate independently of its greater self. Still, trypophobia took the reins of someone else's body when multiple shadows crawled up from the sides of the peak, rising, to reveal...

A massive, arachnid cluster of countless eyes and carapace limbs; a beast so swollen with mortals' terrors that the end of its body couldn't be seen past the cliffside to the Fade's shadowed horizon.

*“Foolish da’len,” the peak trembled, “you should have thanked me and left your fear where it lay, forgotten. You think that pain is a gift from the gods? That the Maker and Mythal shape and protect your path towards a purpose, however unkind? Your suffering and doubts are meaningless.”*

Justinia descended and placed a hand on Ellana’s shoulder, bestowing to her the solace Ellana was usually the one to give away. “If you would,” the Divine murmured, “please tell Leliana: I am sorry, I failed you too.”

The glowing figure rocketed at the Nightmare’s true form just as the demon’s spider legs moved to strike, a blinding yellow explosion engulfing the peak and crags past it. The party stumbled to the ground as it shook, before Elissa’s shield deftly blocked an attack from the Aspect. Elissa grit her teeth against the poor angle but held her ground while the party scrambled to their feet. The Nightmare’s greater form couldn’t be seen from their position, meaning Justinia had crippled it long enough for the party to face the Nightmare’s Aspect without interference.

They didn’t need to defeat the Aspect. They just needed to reach the rift.

Someone else launched at the Aspect with a smite turning his sword white. “Run for the rift!”

“Carv!” Carver yelled as the party bolted past him.

Someone else severed the Aspect’s shoulder and spider legs with one explosive blow. “I’m keeping my promise!”

“Alive!” Carver reminded as Ellana tossed back a stream of fire.

The Aspect shrieked in pain, and someone else snatched the moment of distraction to chase after the party. Ellana glanced back only for her eyes to widen and mouth to open with a silent scream — before Elissa flung an arm around the inquisitor’s waist and shoved her through the rift. The Cousland’s shield protected their backs from a flagpole-sized spider leg.

The Nightmare’s greater body loomed over the peak from behind Carver, its limbs flinging for the rift Ellana activated to force passage into the waking world.

*“Your fear,” the demon roared, “is my feast!”*



Garrett tossed Carver through the rift by the scruff of his neck without sparing a look someone else's way, only to be delayed with protecting Carver's back from the Nightmare's aggressive approach. Summer Sword suddenly lodged itself into a cluster of spider legs.

"You——!?"

Someone else barrelled into Garrett and stretched their fingers out to the waking world.

*Shink!*

"Agh!" they cried out with a spider leg stabbing through their calf.

Garrett fell through the rift, but someone else was left behind. They whipped their head about and finally spotted Summer Sword still stuck in spider legs overhead forcing their way through the rift. Hot tears spilled out of someone else's eyes as they flailed about reaching for their sword while the Nightmare's limb wriggled still inside their leg, jerking them around like an unwanted burr. Their brain tumbled about in their skull before cold metal finally touched their palm, and they jerked their blade out in a sharp arc. The Nightmare's limb and several others fell in severed pieces.

By then, someone else was faint with blood loss.

They picked themselves up by their arms and crawled for the rift, unwilling to drop Summer Sword or to give up on fighting. Living. The Nightmare's shadow darkened over someone else with a wet, hair-rising exhale. They heard the moment the demon's pincers shot for them.

*"BORF!"*

A canine weight suddenly shoved someone else through the rift the same time a heart-wrenching yelp tore out of Dog's throat.

*"Dog, no!"*

Someone else tumbled head-first into the main hall of Adamant Fortress with a crack of bone. Through the adrenaline, they couldn't tell which — only that Dog's body lay limp next to them on the ground with a bloody gash across his body. Meanwhile, the Nightmare snarled in all its terrifyingly ugly glory beyond the rift. Around someone else, Ellana's companions were battling the Aspect while Elissa modelled the perfect knight, shielding Ellana from wayward

harm despite the latter's stubborn support of her friends' fight. Garrett and Carver defended the two of them from the greater Nightmare's spider legs nearly as long as the Mother's tentacles.

With a determined gesture, Ellana finally sealed the rift closed around the Nightmare's legs and protruding pincers. At the same time, the Aspect went down and a severed spider leg flew for Solas' back. Someone else leapt with a burst of adrenaline and moved to cut it down.

Except their blade missed, uncoordinated with blood loss, and the spider leg stabbed through their abdomen instead.

Solas grabbed someone else as they collapsed, the sage shouting to the party, "Carver's wounded!"

Elissa's own pained cry echoed, descending into sobs. "*Dog...!*"

Darkness draped over someone else's consciousness like a parent tucking them into bed. They surrendered to the sweet release of sleep.

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"I hear you're the Champion's brother: Junior."

"Carver, actually."

"Must be tough. Sharing two famous names, and all."

A pleased hum, despite the statement. "I like my names, all of them. Is there something you need?"

The weight of existing slowly came into focus — and with it, sound, colour, until finally, meaning. Someone else blearily noted a gorgeously furnished bedroom around them painted claret and draped

in silks. Subtly perfumed dried herbs and flowers filled porcelain vases upon ornate side tables, and a breeze drifted past sheer curtains up to the room's high ceiling, where painted figures danced the ronde. A vanity stood against a wall, its stool under Carver who was sitting at someone else's bedside. A man in lightweight robes with the Inquisition's symbol stitched over his left breast nodded at Carver and hung a pair of clothes covered with canvas in a nearby wardrobe.

"Oui," the Inquisition member replied. "Lady Josephine has ordered that formal wear be distributed to all Inquisition attendees. For inventory purposes, I must track which attendees have received their attire." He turned to someone else who was still waking up. "I need the patient's name— *Maker's breath*, what are you!?"

Someone else groaned at the noise. "Carver's doppelgänger." At the Inquisition member's confused expression, they elaborated, "Statistically speaking, it's possible for someone who looks identical to you to be walking elsewhere in Thedas without you knowing."

The man faintly nodded, collecting himself. "...I see. Name?"

Carver cut in. "*Carver* is a common surname."

"It is," the man impatiently pressed, "and as the Inquisition was founded in Ferelden, I'll need a first name."

"Gavin." Heads turned to note Garrett's arrival as he trudged over, his gaze then snapping to the man taking inventory. "Did you need him for something?"

The Inquisition member's lips mumbled in sync with quill strokes upon parchment. "Gavin Carver...no, we're done here, Champion. He's all yours."

Someone else blinked at the member quickly vanishing through a doorway. A lot of time had *definitely* passed – but *how much*? They unwittingly met Garrett's eyes.

The mage curtly defended, "I'm not here for you. *Someone* has to make sure my brother doesn't slack off on his weapons training." Or in other words, keep Carver away from his former abomination.

Carver pouted, standing up. "I can swing a sword just fine."

"In the waking world, people grow *tired*."

Garrett flung an arm over Carver's shoulder and walked him out until their voices no longer carried to the bedroom. Someone else slowly sat up with a wince – only to nearly shriek in realisation that Leliana was standing in a corner of the room, and likely had been the entire time. The woman soundlessly moved to someone else's side and helped them rise from the bed on their feet. They were dressed in simple linen clothes and their left arm was in a sling, and Leliana toed pattens towards them that they slipped on.

Leliana held their good arm and led them across the bedroom. "The many healers and mages who worked on your wounds have prescribed you to walking a circuit upon waking."

She supported them as they limped through a doorway into a deserted, dazzling hall. "A circuit around this...mansion?"

"Property of Lord Esmeral Abernache," Leliana shared. "The Winter Ball is upon us, and the Inquisition's best must prepare within carriage distance of the venue, rather than return to Skyhold with the rest of our numbers. Josie has journeyed here to make sure our outfits and etiquette are flawless."

Someone else's brows furrowed. "The Inquisition's *best*?"

"Ellana," Leliana listed, "her usual companions, along with Josie, Cullen, and myself. Viscount Garrett will also attend, as must Grand Enchanter Fiona seeing as her mages are *allies* with the Inquisition, not servants."

"And our numbers?"

"Back to their previous posts," Leliana confirmed. "Additionally, the Orlesian Order of the Grey have returned to their hold in Montsimmard under supervision of the Fereldan Order with Loghain's guidance and Clarel's imprisonment. Ellana will judge her fate. Both Orders have identified ambassadors – Thom and Velanna – to erect an embassy in Skyhold where they can have constantly open communications with the Inquisition for better coordination of efforts. Thom's still by Ellana's side for at least the Winter Ball. Theron has meanwhile replaced Duncan at Soldier's Peak with the latter's descent to the Deep Roads." She sighed. "Elissa and Alistair are attending the Winter Ball as representatives of the Wardens. The War of the Lions affects everyone, especially an organisation with a base in Orlais' borders."

Someone else paused in the middle of the hallway, and Leliana

maintained her supporting grip. “I suppose my condition required I follow the Inquisitor’s party to a mansion, rather than ride a long, bumpy road back to Skyhold.”

Cornflower blue eyes softened. “*Are* you up for the Winter Ball? I hate to say it, but we need your deduction skills and political sense.”

A weak chuckle escaped them. “The most strenuous activity there will merely be standing guard of the charcuterie tables to ensure Sera doesn’t steal all the bread.” If Sera didn’t already see someone else as a monster.

Leliana squeezed their arm. “Ellana, Elissa, and Garrett decided to inform their closest companions of your real story. Otherwise, you’re a secret that will never leave their circles; a cover story has been fed to everyone else in the Inquisition and the Wardens where necessary. I leave Ferelden’s royalty – whatever you decide to tell them – to you.”

Garrett had called them a name.

*Gavin Carver* released a long exhale, breathing life into his identity before meeting Leliana’s gaze. Losing the right to call himself Carver Hawke *hurt*, but he *had* promised to accept the repercussions of replacing a babe in his crib however unintentional. “Ellana, Elissa, and Garrett created a cover story?”

“They weren’t sure anyone would buy it,” Leliana revealed, “but Varric pointed out that it didn’t matter; he could sell it.”

Apparently, Gavin Carver – nicknamed “Carv” – was an orphan the Hawkes had adopted before the twins’ birth. The original Carver – now popularly known as “Junior” due to the Tale of the Champion – had been born sickly. With the Hawkes funnelling their earnings into supporting their frail youngest, “Carver” had represented Junior during village headcounts to rescue the Hawkes from paying higher taxes for a larger household, but even that hadn’t been enough. Carver had thus left the farm to join the king’s army with the intent to send money back – however, the failure of Ferelden’s southern mail system had turned this attempt futile. By the time Carver could properly send money to the Hawkes, Garrett had already become financially secure in Kirkwall and the Hawkes hadn’t needed the money anymore.

Junior’s improved health and the infant Inquisition’s demand for scouts meant that Leliana had later recruited Junior when he had shown up at Haven, intent to help. Junior had thus naturally been involved in the siege of Adamant Fortress as a hidden, independent

scout, yet he had ended up in the Fade with Ellana's party before they had managed to escape. It explained why few in the Inquisition recognised Junior's face, while Carver's was more well-known.

"He goes by Junior?" Carver frowned. "He should know he doesn't have to."

"Carver is a common name," Leliana's eyes twinkled, "just like the songs. It was bound to happen that Ellana and Elissa's parties would have to grow used to having more than one Carver around. Junior's apparently tickled pink because he has never had a nickname before, and witnessing Ellana and Elissa's companions call out to him by it evidently validates his existence. Everyone he meets remembers their conversations with him. He especially enjoys chatting with Varric."

Carver watched Leliana's face. "You're training him."

"He needs the skills to support the story," Leliana confirmed. "With Viscount Garrett's permission, Lace Harding is moulding Junior into a scout who can work with teams. He'll never leave Ellana or Garrett's side for a mission without half a dozen other scouts also supporting him."

"Lace Harding is here?" Carver glanced around the Orlesian mansion.

"She comes and goes," Leliana cryptically replied. "At the moment, Viscount Garrett is primarily teaching Junior battle awareness. It's... going as well as you'd expect."

"They're *bonding*," Carver reasoned, resuming their stroll. "You aren't...upset with me?"

Leliana bit her lip.

"No amount of words can express my regret." Carver's face fell. "You're the Inquisition's spymaster, and Divine Justinia's earlier. You've lost count of how many trusted friends have betrayed you. I'm sorry to add to your grief."

No wonder Leliana was by Carver's side; the Inquisition needed someone to gauge his loyalty, and Leliana had volunteered even if she didn't want to doubt him. Carver wasn't the first person lulled into a sense of safety by Leliana's friendly approach, and he wouldn't be the last. Still, he accepted his situation.

"Show it in your actions," Leliana gently scolded. "I thought with

time, you'd grow comfortable enough with me where we'd have no secrets between us. Introducing me to Garrett Hawke at Duke Prosper's hunting party had been a considerable step – one I thought had finally closed the gap. Now I realise that though I've confided in you with sensitive subjects, particularly of Solo, you've never returned the favour."

Carver's chest panged with regret. "Leliana, I—"

"Don't bear the entire burden of blame," she softened. "I understand your situation – as best as anyone can. You wore a mask for another's sake for so long, it was hard to slip it off even in trusted company. Did you at least confide in anyone about your troubles, if not me?"

"Wynne, Zevran, Faren, and Shale," Carver shared, "when we secretly confronted Flemeth for Morrigan's sake, and Flemeth revealed to me what I was. Morrigan had requested us to kill Flemeth for her survival, as the older Witch's immortality is apparently credited to her possessing her daughters. You're the first to know outside of our group. Technically, I shouldn't be telling you any of this."

"You didn't know your true situation the entire time?" Leliana's eyes minutely widened at the flood of new information, before she sharply exhaled. "Privacy is everyone's right. Despite my duties, I should still remember to respect it. I extend to you my own apologies."

"Leliana...."

"Morrigan will be at the ball," she revealed, her grip on Carver's arm melting into an embrace. "Should you speak with her, I can imagine her accepting your situation without prejudice — though I must ask if you can decipher her current agenda. As you might know, Celene appointed her as an arcane advisor to the Imperial Court after Vivienne moved out of Val Royeaux."

"From what I can tell, Morrigan at least has no ill intent against the Empress or the Inquisition."

Leliana digested his words, seemingly touched by his freely given information despite her previously honest admission that the Inquisition intended to use him. "Word of advice? Be civil with Cullen, regardless of how he behaves. He's navigating a tough situation."

The Inquisition's commander, a former Templar, and another person who had trusted Carver.

He sighed at the warning. “Does *everyone* who knows the truth hate me?”

“Come along, now.” Leliana led him to the mansion’s courtyard.  
“There’s more.”

## Chapter End Notes

I tried to emphasise the Nightmare’s horrific form in this chapter. Its function in DAI reminds me a little of Atlach-Nacha; in the Lovecraft wiki, the monster’s web is supposedly a bridge between the Dreamlands and the waking world. It is believed that when Atlach-Nacha’s web is complete, the end of the world will come.

I surpassed my word limit here, so I’m splitting the rest of the content off for the next chapter. Thank you for your support!



## Curse

Lord Esmeral's courtyard stretched out in an oblong blanket of limestone lined with lilyturfs and punctuated with a statement fountain in the centre. The Orlesian lord's mansion surrounded the courtyard like a horseshoe, and marble steps descended from different points of the mansion's veranda where limestone paths linked them to the courtyard. Dogwoods and mondo grass filled the gaps between the mansion, paths, and the oblong pavement, and a pea gravel dry creek bed snaked across the open end of the horseshoe where evergreen conifers closed in.

The courtyard was small. The air felt stifled, but the landscape architect had done their job by making sure the noonday sun still directly shone into the mansion's windows. At the very least, Esmeral's property enjoyed plenty of privacy. When Leliana led Carver out of an indoor hallway for a short stack of marble steps towards the courtyard, they crossed paths with a subdued argument in the veranda.

Fiona sharply huffed. "You *would* pounce on this chance to control all mages. Where I advocate freedom, you seek self-empowerment."

"The two first enchanters clearly doubt your capacity to lead," Vivienne primly replied, allowing Fiona's words to slide off her back. "Their terms are clear: their mages form an alliance with the Inquisition – under *First Enchanter Bethany's* leadership. As the Inquisitor's closest Circle aid, it is my duty to have an answer and solution for her when she asks about the state of our mages. Yours and First Enchanter Bethany's petty quarrels waste Ellana's time and place me in the difficult position of settling conflicts between your factions for her."

"Maker knows you *volunteered*," Fiona accused. "You've been eyeing my seat since the conclave exploded."

A flash of amusement captured Vivienne's eyes, as if Fiona's current situation was no one's envy. The grand enchanter obviously saw it.

"You *lace-loving ersatz enchanter*—!" Fiona built up.

"Name calling?" Dorian tittered aside. "She has no more logic to attack you with."

Cole muttered from Vivienne's shadow. "Fiona isn't like you. *Dorian* is like you."

Vivienne's composure cracked. "I think not."

Dorian smirked. "Now now, the poor thing is trying to pay you a compliment. How so, Cole?"

"The Veil sings around both of you," Cole delighted. "It whispers through you and makes you both brighter."

"The same could be said of any mage," Vivienne dismissed. "Beyond that, I have little in common with a noble from Tevinter."

Cole disagreed. "No – for most mages like Fiona, it's a tool. A toil. *You* make it *you*."

Dorian cast Fiona a look. "Also, we clearly have the best fashion sense of anyone around."

Vivienne sniffed. "True, but I hardly expect the Fade to notice." She quirked a brow Fiona's way as if to say, *there you have it*. "If that's all, my dear?"

Fiona flushed with mixed emotion before speechlessly stalking away, just as Vivienne, Dorian, and Cole noticed Carver and Leliana.

Vivienne watched his face. "You should consider playing the Game, Ser Carver."

Carver shuffled his feet. "I don't *enjoy* masks."

"No one does," the enchanter stated pointedly, then strode past him.

Usually one with a word for any situation, Dorian merely moved to pat Carver's shoulder only to note his sling. Carver watched the man awkwardly recall his hand and disappear into the courtyard while Cole sidled up to Carver.

"The Nightmare had corrupted the warden mages," Cole murmured, "Trembling, my knife at his throat. *Not this, not this*, swore I'd do whatever they asked but *not this*. In death, sacrifice. His hand grips my wrist, pulls the blade across his throat." He blinked in the direction Vivienne had gone. "If the whole world turns on mages, where will they go? Fiona prays it will never happen, but prayer isn't a place. Vivienne cares – that's why she hurts."

Vivienne was someone who physically couldn't break the law but cared *deeply* about the plight of her fellow mages. The woman's grasp for power and recognition from non-mages was her way of establishing a seat for mages at the big table, so that they might have a voice. If Vivienne could be recognised by non-mages and they gave her influence, she could improve mages' lives. But the world was unkind to mages, and in Orlais, one must enter the Game to gain influence. Vivienne had thus developed a cold yet charming exterior over time, an intimidating woman with whom the bon ton was *dying* to befriend. She called everyone dear. Like an iceberg, Vivienne's surface appearance and actions belied a deeper meaning.

Where the Hawke mages *burned* with passion, Vivienne *condensed* hers into cold, glittering diamonds.

In Emprise du Lion, Cole had said that Carver liked his name; it reminded him of the reason Carver could keep living, the person whose life he especially cherished. Even though they were in the Inquisition, the ever-proper Vivienne had still called Carver by his "surname."

The woman was hard to read. Still, Carver was glad for her presence.

"Thank you, Cole."

The young man nodded as Carver and Leliana continued their stroll for the courtyard. One of the mansion's doors that led to the veranda was open to let the breeze in, and a dogwood cast heavy shade over the room past it. Carver could see Ellana slumped on the floor against a bed, her red eyes staring forlornly at Dog's collar in her hands. Sitting on the bed behind her was Alistair with a hand stroking Elissa's hair. Alistair noticed Carver gazing their way, stood up, and wordlessly closed the door.

Carver swallowed thickly. Dog had been his friend too. Still, he understood that losing Dog must have been like losing a limb for Elissa.

"Ellana now has two factions of mages under her?"

Leliana hummed at Carver's question. "One under Grand Enchanter Fiona, another under First Enchanter Bethany. It's quite the story."

The Fereldan Order of the Grey understood the value of confiding in others to help heal from trauma. The culture was a product of Solona and Leliana's efforts at Soldier's Peak during the Fifth Blight, and

when Templars and mages had left their Circles at the start of the Mage-Templar War to join the Fereldan Order, they had been introduced to the Wardens' form of therapy. With recent events, Fereldan wardens had also begun practising this with the Orlesian wardens, whose mages had especially been scarred by Livius' manipulations. Carver knew one of the reasons Garrett had originally left Kirkwall for Skyhold had been to gauge for Bethany if the Inquisition was worth allying with, and the Wardens' activities had evidently improved Bethany's opinion of the Inquisition's work, leading to the Illuminati and Wynne's mages formally joining the Inquisition.

The news had stirred all of southern Thedas. The Inquisition was essentially in charge of a new Circle of Magi, now. To no one's surprise, Gaspard had beaten – sometimes literally – all of Orlais' other nobles to inviting Ellana to the Winter Ball as his guest. Whether or not Ellana wanted it, she held southern Thedas in the palm of her hand.

“As for what First Enchanter Bethany wrote in reaction to the truth of her twin,” Leliana continued, “you’ll have to ask Viscount Garrett. It’s not my place to say.”

“I understand.”

A gaggle of Orlesian nobles were apparently also enjoying a promenade through Lord Esmeral's courtyard. Near the fountain was Cassandra beating up Bull with a stick, the latter constantly grunting “Harder!” while Sera, Thom, Ellana, and Dorian barely batted an eye, more absorbed with likely pilfered cookies they were consuming between themselves while sitting on the fountain. When they deigned to grant Bull's training attention, they snickered at innuendos.

“This is why the Qun doesn't let women fight!” Bull complained.

*SMACK.*

Cassandra stepped over Bull's body and held the stick out to Ellana. “Your turn.”

The nobles gasped and fled for the indoors, scandalised, while one of the nobles strutted to Josephine standing against the railing of a veranda and proceeded to burst into hushed complaints. Based on his claret mask, the nobleman was their host Lord Esmeral. A hulking stack of muscle and furs tromped out of a door and towered over Esmeral and Josephine in the veranda.

“Chief Movran the Under,” Leliana identified. “He bloodied Skyhold’s defences with live goats in retaliation for killing his unpopular son, the Hand of Korth. His punishment is serving the Inquisition as an ambassador with Lord Esmeral.”

Carver watched the weaselly Esmeral enthusiastically gesture while Movran chortled and, evidently, threatened to show his buttocks to the Orlesian noble. Josephine’s brow seemed to be ageing, but behind a sheaf of papers, her lips trembled with the threat of exploding into unladylike laughter.

“Together,” Leliana continued, “they are offensive on every level. Lord Esmeral and Chief Movran are a useful pair to inflict on others. ‘Do as we say or we will not recall our ambassadors.’”

Ellana’s hesitant smacking at Bull with a stick regained Carver’s attention as Cassandra joined Sera, Thom, and Dorian on the fountain.

“I noticed one of my books is missing,” the Seeker began.

Sera shrugged. “Reet, which one?”

“The one with all the illustrations.”

Sera choked on her cookies. “Oh, tha’ one was full on. Ah chucked ‘t unda yer bed.”

Cassandra sighed. “You don’t know how to ask permission first?”

“Fine,” Sera slowly enunciated. “Please can ah *not* find morra yer mucky lil’ books. Drawings. Ew.”

Dorian snorted. “I couldn’t finish the last one you lent me. I actually feel dumber for having tried.”

Cassandra flushed. “No one asked you, Tevinter!”

Ellana paused in her beating with a raised brow. “Maybe I should read one of these books.”

Cassandra shot up to her feet. “No, you can’t! Y-You’re the Inquisitor!” So that was what horror looked like on the Seeker’s face. “Whatever you do, don’t tell Varric!”

“Don’t tell me what?”

Carver’s lips twitched as he watched Ellana and her companions

descend into juvenile chaos in Lord Esmeral's courtyard. Garrett and Junior had been walking with Varric and joined in the amusement as Varric learned that in the Seeker's taciturn shell beat a romantic heart. They all looked happy. Without Carver.

Before he could dwell on it, Leliana led him on a route back to his room, where they encountered Cullen leaving what was likely his. Past the door he closed behind himself burned thin candles in a heavily-curtained room and a desk swamped with papers.

Carver straightened despite his limp. "Cullen—"

The commander looked like he had stepped into horse dung. "Ser Gavin, I've been meaning to see you."

"...Really?"

"You were barely coherent for a long time after Adamant," Cullen shared. "I've since promoted Ser Clay as a temporary captain while you'll slowly be off-boarded with the intention of returning fully to your role as a captain in the king's army, not the Inquisition." Clay referred to Speechless, another member of Maric's Shield. "While you're with us, you'll serve as a consultant who, *despite my reservations*, is vitally needed due to your experience and skills."

Cullen shot Leliana a look the redhead evenly met.

Carver winced. "Cullen, I don't mean to create work for you—"

"That'll be 'Commander' to you," Cullen cut off. "Whatever your intentions or true nature, the fact remains that someone who's dying already had their chance at life – they lack the right to try again at the cost of someone else. Even if it was by accident, you should've at least come clean to those who mattered. I pity the Hawke family."

"I'll work it out with them," Carver accepted his candour, "and I appreciate that you're looking out for everyone under you."

Cullen's jaw clenched, a whisper slipping out of him. "This is a mistake. *You* are a mistake. I'll thank you for staying away from me unless summoned."

The commander didn't wait for a response and merely continued on whatever errand had drawn him out of his room. Carver couldn't drop back into his bed fast enough.

“Cullen’s battling lyrium withdrawals.”

Leliana’s assisting motions paused at Carver’s observation. She looked at him.

“Has been for a while now.” Carver closed his eyes, willing a bout of dizziness to pass. “He’s suffering particularly badly nowadays and is pushing Cassandra to admit that he needs to step down – except I’m also leaving the Inquisition’s army. He has too much on his plate.”

Leliana’s voice lowered. “As you know before they vanished, the Seekers were reforming to respect theirs and the Templars’ origins: a host of mages and non-mages cooperating for the betterment of all society. Tranquility was originally a tool for recruitment, not a weapon. When Cassandra shared this secret with Cullen after recruiting him under the Divine, he was emboldened to finally make a commitment he had been considering. He believed that if he could wean himself off of lyrium completely, he could give hope to Templars. When I told him about your Templar abilities and that you’re indeed the same Carver from song, he was further inspired.”

Carver’s eyes slid open to peer at her. “Except I’m effective with these abilities because I did what demons do: possess a living body. I’m sure you’ve deduced it yourself.”

Leliana’s lips thinned. “Should Cullen ever step down, he and Cassandra had been considering you as his replacement.”

“A cruel honour,” Carver sighed with scalding guilt. “He’s a good man and a good soldier; I’d hate to see him step down because he’s doing the right thing. The last we spoke privately, he was searching for Raleigh Samson, and considering he no longer trusts me, would you...?”

“If Raleigh’s serving as Corypheus’ right-hand man, we would do well to locate him.”

“Thank you, Leliana.”

She passed him his medicine. “Even now, you put others before yourself. Rest now, Carver. Regain your strength.”

X

When Carver next awakened, it seemed a new day had passed or the sun hadn’t changed position. Solas was sitting on Junior’s stool and

holding his head in his hands, weariness shaping the line of his shoulders.

“You and Ellana would risk death for others.”

Carver blinked slowly. “You state facts, as usual.”

“I would advise you against such risks, but that would defy who you are. ...*Fenedhis*.” The curse startled Carver. “I can’t tell someone to value their life if I don’t already find value in it.”

“I’m useful.”

“You’re more than that,” Solas suddenly corrected, before quieting, breaking his heated silence with a sigh. “The greatest curse of my people is *dirthara-ma*. ‘May you learn.’ Yours and Ellana’s existences have been a curse on me since I’ve opened my eyes and reached a humbling conclusion — one that pervades my thoughts and even my dreams. I cannot escape it. I cannot unsee it. People like you, Ellana, Varric, Cassandra...you’re all *alive*.”

Hopes, dreams, relationships — people innately desired to build these things with each other and to live in every moment. To make every day count. The whole world was connected within six degrees of separation, and no life was without meaning.

They weren’t a world of Tranquil.

“...The attack on Haven was my failure,” Solas murmured. “I nearly lost you and Ellana — for what? Pride? Then to find you both blue in the snow....”

Carver recognised crippling guilt. After the attack on Haven, Solas couldn’t look Ellana in the eye but couldn’t leave her side either. His hot-cold behaviour with Ellana and distance with Carver now made more sense when coloured by the emotion, but the man was still talking.

“I had you tortured.”

“...So you have,” Carver carefully replied.

“Carver,” Solas spoke heavily, “I have no proof save for my own words, but with all sincerity....” Purple-grey eyes gazed up in melancholy. “I deeply regret my actions. I’m sorry.”



Shock lanced Carver in the chest, and for a heartbeat, he forgot how to speak. Eventually, he found his voice.

“...You?” Of all people, Solas had *apologised*? “Then...your mission....”

Solas’ expression crumpled. “The world is imbalanced.”

Carver bit his lip. “The times have changed.”

“I *brought* the change,” Solas’ voice morosely tensed. “The fault is mine. Loneliness with my knowledge does not concern me, but my own pride has marked every creature on this earth. I confront my sins with every elf and dwarf that I pass. I owe it to everyone now, more than ever, to restore a world where one might flourish.”

Loneliness didn’t concern him? What fallacy. No one who felt loved would be drawn to so great and terrible an ambition.

Carver sighed, switching tactics. “I can’t believe I missed it. The signs. You can’t stay away from Ellana’s side, you couldn’t look her way while she was recovering from Haven, and farther back, you stared in shock when you thought she had died. *Stock-still shock*. Not just at the thought of her dead, but at the sudden and real fact that....”

Some sentences, their meaning could change based on which word was emphasised. Carver made sure to encompass each possible complicated emotion in his next breath.

“...You love her.”

The claim startled Solas into a humourless chuckle. “Once again you surprise me with shallow logic.”

“I don’t have to be your age to recognise denial,” Carver dismissed Solas’ tone. “You can ‘like’ Ellana as one would a charming creature. That’s what you used to tell yourself: that for all that we might entertain, irritate, or surprise you, we’re still fundamentally *less*. But that can’t be true if the idea of losing Ellana pricks your heart. Makes it bleed.”

“Carver.”

Solas’ tone, previously emotional, pressed down with an edge. The change came subtly and in increments while Solas spoke, until Carver wisely recognised a warning.

"I recognise this game you're playing." Solas tensed. "I never thought you would stoop to so low of an angle."

"Game?" Carver echoed, confused.

"Prodding me for a reaction," Solas clinically stated. "Creating weaknesses."

Carver spluttered, but at Solas' tension, reined in his first witty response. "That—— This isn't that."

Solas cut in. "Then *what is it*, Carver?"

"...A shovel talk."

Solas blinked rapidly.

"You're thinking of pulling her to you while you both dream," Carver braved. "You're thinking of having a conversation about her recent past, her future. Her. I'm telling you now, at whatever point later in time you and her talk about feelings, you are to treat Ellana with sincerity." He pointed when Solas opened his mouth. "*Sincerity*, Solas."

He straightened his drooping shoulders, head tilting. "...*Should* it happen," Solas spoke slowly, "I agree."

Well, at least Solas had *some* sense of humanity. In a twisted way, the hidden god genuinely respected feelings. Carver personally preferred that Ellana would end up never returning Solas' blooming feelings, but he also wished companionship and happiness for the woman, especially through such tough, isolating times. A deeper, smaller part of Carver also hoped that Solas would find peace with Ellana and redirect his ambitions away from apocalyptic behaviour to restorative efforts. Though scarred, the world could only benefit from attempts at peace, not even greater scarring. Some actions were just irreversible.

A stack of parchment was carefully pressed into Carver's hands. On top of them sat a wax stick, a quill, and a wooden stamp of the Theirin crest. Carver slowly sat up in his bed, gazing at Solas with touched surprise.

The man uncapped an ink well on one of Carver's bedside tables and, with an elegant gesture, lit a nearby candle. "For melting the wax," Solas said, before rising from his stool. "I don't recommend leaving your bed to write a few letters, but don't forget to walk around your room everyday. If you place your letters by the door, Leliana will pick

them up. Your meals will likewise await you at your door.”

Carver watched him leave the room, astonished. “Were you one of the healers who worked on me?”

Solas paused, face heavy with an emotion Carver wasn’t equipped to comprehend, before a narrow chin jerked at where linen covered Carver’s bandaged abdomen. “That one’s at least my fault.”

X

After much internal conflict, Carver decided to pass on his cover story to Cailan, Anora, and Nails in his update about Corypheus’ manipulation of a fake Calling, whereupon the Crown decided that at this point, the king’s army couldn’t fault “Gavin Carver” for his identity fraud. He was thus pardoned of a crime that the victim was refusing to press charges for anyway. More than anything, the Crown was enraged at Corypheus’ actions considering Cailan’s condition, and expressed fierce gratitude that Carver was working with the Inquisition.

In the same exchange, Carver was troubled to hear of a rogue apostate’s failed – if clumsy – assassination attempt against the king and queen, and opened an inquiry to Nails for further investigation. Aware of consequently high tensions in Denerim and the possibility of venatori involvement, Carver shed his cowardice and also limped out of his room to search for Bull, who was fortunately rooming just next to him.

With Dorian.

They were clothed, *thank the Maker*, yet Bull still considerably stepped out and closed the door behind him to listen as Carver explained how he didn’t want the Arishok to hear about his true situation from Qunari spies. Carver didn’t divulge that his letter for the Arishok also included suspicions of venatori in Denerim, but Bull surprisingly promised that the letter would reach its intended recipient without further persuasion. Apparently, Bull and Dorian were now exclusive, and they could partially credit it to Carver.

That didn’t mean the air between them wasn’t awkward. According to Bull, he admitted that Carver was only still with the Inquisition because Ellana was allowing it; everyone had to tolerate sharing the same building as Carver, much as they had been with Cole when he had first been recruited. Carver was an alien existence to them. It felt like starting over at square one.

While Bull and Carver agreed to keep it professional and respect Arishok's reaction between them, whatever it might be, one of Carver's first friends turned out to not be overly affected by the news when the qunari's response arrived. Reading between the lines, Carver detected that Arishok was in fact a little upset that Zevran – "the elf" – had known about Carver's secret before Arishok had. The qunari knew better than most that Carver was a proponent of world order, and with Carver's Templar abilities and the Fade's past allergy of Carver, he wasn't a risk to the people around him. Carver was still privately Arishok's kadan.

However, Arishok didn't recommend that Carver travelled to Seheron or Par Vollen.

*Ever.*

Accepting the logical warning, Carver focused on work. Between the Ben-Hassrath and Postal Service's investigation, Anora was livid to learn that the Venatori would dare use the Crown's near-murder for fool-proofing their plans of burning Denerim down with a venatori fire ship. The king's army and the Ben-Hassrath swiftly managed to sink the fire ship far from Denerim's port, the proven plot triggering the Qunari priesthood to assign Tallis on the Venatori's trail, and Leliana was quickly brought up to speed as Tallis' investigation brought her to Skyhold, then Orlais.

While Carver had been occupied with all this, he had also been agonising over what to write to Bethany and Leandra. He painstakingly drafted numerous letters of which he ended up only sending a few — only to fret over his pose and decidedly send another dozen letters to follow up. Half of Carver's outbound mail, between personal letters to Arishok and formal responses to the Crown, was Carver's unfiltered guilt and concern for the Hawkes. It felt wrong to claim he hadn't been able to read Bethany's response to his true identity because Garrett was evidently avoiding him. The very least Carver could do was reach out. Though, Bethany and Leandra had yet to write back.

As three spy networks – though the Postal Service chose to remain beyond Leliana's awareness – came together to hunt down venatori spies within the Inquisition, Josephine's exhaustive preparations in Lord Esmeral's mansion began to finally reach their completion.

The Winter Ball was upon them.

# Being Used

## Chapter Notes

Life is still hectic, but I gotta write to calm down. Enjoy another chapter!

Extra note: Most of you dear teapots have been mature, but unfortunately over the months I've experienced anonymous reviewers in fics of mine leaving flames across FFN and AO3 with consistent writing styles, which suggests to me that they might be the same person. I didn't think I'd have to tap the sign, but this is a friendly reminder that if you don't like a story, flaming it across platforms won't change anything. You're free to stop reading, just as I'm free to post content that makes me happy, and might make someone else happy. Block me if it helps. I've blocked the *non-anon* accounts that have harassed me in FFN PMs (again, with similar writing styles, this person must be determined to own all these accounts), but I can't block specific anonymous reviews.

I've included a no-harassment line in my profile and am also including this reminder in my latest content, which happens to be this chapter. Sorry if this A/N brings you down. It brings me down too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Carver left his room for the mansion's dining hall, Dorian and Solas spotted him likewise on their way to the same meeting with Josephine.

"Carver," Dorian greeted, rousing up simulated friendliness in a kind attempt. "Tell me I'm right."

Carver blinked as he joined Dorian and Solas. "Uh...you're right?"

Solas shook his head. "Our fineries reflect the Inquisition's colours and otherwise matter little."

"You say that because you intend to pass off as a servant," Dorian accused. "At least *I* managed to rescue the ambassador's assignment to me with enchantment and needlework, though I wish Lady Josephine had spared me the hardship by granting me what I'd requested in the first place. I'm confident that everyone else has been returning theirs to Josephine for customisation that it might at least fit."

Carver's brows furrowed. "You're talking about...clothes?"

"The ones we'll wear at the Winter Ball," Dorian confirmed. "What travesty has the ambassador passed off to *you*?"

"They can differ?" Carver quickly amended, "Our uniforms can differ?"

"Yours resembles a uniform?" Dorian interpreted, sighing heavily. "Honestly, that woman, no need to stick the fact he's a *soldier* in people's faces while we attend a ball."

Carver recalled slips of canvas hanging in his wardrobe. "I haven't actually looked at what was given to me."

"Carver." Their heads turned to see Ellana hastily catching up with them. "I understand Cullen imparted to you the reality of your position." The mood dimmed, and the woman's lips thinned in sympathy. "You're currently on probation: you aren't permitted to walk anywhere alone, and to ease everyone's minds, I'm assigning a trusted mage to stick by your side until your probation ends. Dorian \_\_\_\_"

"I'll do it."

Dorian kicked a brow up at Solas' interjection. "You're amicable with spirits."

Solas raised his chin. "No one would understand Carver's nature better than I, and he isn't a spirit regardless. If my reputation is in question, you need only look at how many demons I've killed by your side, Ellana."

She snorted. "I've lost track of my own count after the first rift. Very well, Solas, if it's what you wish."

The four of them strode into Lord Esmeral's dining hall, where it seemed everyone was either suffering etiquette lessons under Josephine or navigating ballroom dance lessons with Vivienne. Aside from the obvious exceptions, everyone seemed physically *miserable*. Bull had even been stuffed into a doublet — likely to grow comfortable wearing one in anticipation of the ball. His eyepatched expression looked the farthest thing from comfortable. Upon noticing Ellana, Josephine clapped her hands and summoned everyone to her corner of the hall.

“It’s time to lay down ground rules...” the Antivan began.

Varric nudged Carver from the side and whispered as Josephine recited a speech. “Hey Shiny, I haven’t seen *you* enduring these lessons.”

Carver hadn’t been aware there had been any. “I have a broken arm and a stabbed leg, Tethras, what’s your excuse?”

The author huffed. “I’ve been attending them! Every excruciating second. Apparently, Kirkwall charm will barely be enough to keep me afloat in an Orlesian social event.”

Carver eyed him. “We’ve attended an Orlesian hunting party.”

“And to that, Ruffles said this.” Varric imitated a look one might give a poor benighted thing.

“...But none of this will matter if we can’t resolve Orlais’ civil war,” Josephine emphasised, a sharp gaze cutting Carver and Varric’s way and effectively silencing them. The woman smiled beatifically. “The Inquisition possesses considerable influence that we must convince Orlais’ nobility to acknowledge and welcome through our competence. Our conduct will gain us court approval; the *political figure* we choose to support in the civil war will gain us *Orlais*.”

“This is where the true challenge lies.” Leliana stepped up, to subdued groans among her listeners as if the etiquette and dance lessons hadn’t been agonising enough. “Whoever Ellana decides to promote, we must provide our best assistance in elevating this person, crippling the rest, and anticipating a likely assassination attempt from servants of Corypheus on the Empress — without disrupting the ball.”

Sera groaned. “Inotha words, break the rules bu’ donna break’em.”

Leliana’s lips twitched upwards. “Consider this a glimpse into the bardic arts. One must grasp social rules inside and out to abuse their loopholes. In that respect, Ellana bears the *most* hardship among us where she must both navigate the Game *and* make decisions for the entire Inquisition.”

Ellana chuckled. “Thanks for that, Leliana. Who are my political options anyway, besides the obvious?”

“Empress Celene and Duke Gaspard erupted into physical conflict only recently,” Leliana shared. “Since before the War of the Lions, the

throne's main counterpart has been Ambassador Briala, the only figure that Orlais' city elves and Dalish population listen to. Tensions have risen between Orlais and its elven population in recent years, and with the establishment of an elven noble in Ferelden, elves in southern Thedas have been gaining influence. Orlais and its trade partners are feeling the impact of elven protests and strikes, and Empress Celene's influence is fast draining with each of her heavy military responses. The University of Orlais has expressed condemnation of their greatest benefactor, and Ferelden's Crown has even implied support to Orlais' elves should they choose to rebel and take over the empire. Orlais in true fashion is pretending it's not threatening to split in half, but the nobility is privately panicking. Should the Empress and Duke Gaspard reach an amicable conclusion to their war tomorrow, it will not resolve Orlais' widespread elven discontent."

"Then I must do more than simply choose a side," Ellana noted, brow furrowing at the conundrum. "Corypheus intends to trigger chaos across Orlais by forcing the empire to suffer a shocking murder. While we're at the ball, we need to prevent the Empress' death *and* somehow point Orlais toward a path of healing."

Josephine fretted. "We have time until the end of the ball to find an answer."

"Carver," Leliana suddenly addressed, "any advice?"

The bard was trying to prove to everyone that Carver was trustworthy, sure, but that didn't stop him from wishing the ground would swallow him as everyone's heads turned his way. He dithered. "None I'm inclined towards."

Ellana encouraged him, curse her kind heart. "I'm willing to hear any deduction you might have."

Carver already regretted speaking. "...On the night of the peace talks, Duke Gaspard will hire a mercenary band to bolster his chevalier numbers in a surprise attack on the palace; if you break into his trophy room, you'll find his written orders there. At the same time, Empress Celene will seduce one of the chevaliers, flip them, and extract troop movements from the poor sod. She'll then turn the surprise attack into a trap where the moment Gaspard's chevaliers strike, she'll have Gaspard arrested for treason. The flipped chevalier will be found bound in Celene's bed, naked. An elven locket passed on to Ambassador Briala from her mother will be found in the Empress' vault near her chambers — proof of a history between the Empress



and the Ambassador.”

Carver sighed, continuing, “You can persuade the flipped chevalier and mercenary to testify, and steal the written orders and the locket. Evidence that Duke Gaspard and Empress Celene would go to these lengths, and the fact that Ambassador Briala could be compromised by her feelings for a human, would ruin their supporters’ faith in them. You can thus force the three political figures into a public truce.”

The turned heads stared.

Ellana spluttered. “You know how to blackmail Orlais’ leaders into submission within a *single night*?”

“As I said,” Carver stressed, “it’s not a solution I’m inclined towards.”

Celene, Briala, and Carver’s plans were already altering how the ball would otherwise progress in a certain timeline. So far as Orlais’ elves were concerned, Celene was a heavy-handed racist. Given Briala’s *uncanny* ability to redirect elves out of Celene’s path and target the nobility’s pressure points through coordinated protests, the “threat” of the locket would prove ineffective. It would merely add flavour to how Briala was able to do what she did for the sake of her kind, taking advantage of a noble’s preferences and all even at the cost of personal treasures. So long as Celene wanted to protect her political power, a publicly formal bond of marriage would “force” her to treat Briala as an equal and protect Orlais’ elves, not — fruitlessly — punish them.

Regardless, Carver felt safe dangling fake bait. He and his Orlesian headaches just needed the Inquisition to investigate the ball behind the scenes, prove that Florianne was Corypheus’ agent, and tear her out *root and stem* from Orlesian society.

“Still,” Carver pointed out, “you’ll need considerable court approval before approaching the Empress, Duke, and Ambassador with your blackmail. Otherwise the court will believe them if they dismiss your ‘fabricated’ blackmail as histrionics.” The same could be said regarding Florianne.

Cullen pinched his nose bridge from where he stood behind Josephine. “I hate to say it, Ellana, but that’s the only real solution we can offer you so far, despite its source.”

“Something to consider,” Ellana allowed. “Maker willing, we won’t fail step one: gain court approval.”

Carver brooded where he sat in a carriage with Dorian, Bull, and Solas.

“You look *fine*.”

Carver huffed at Dorian. “I’m being used.”

“The Game is treacherous enough to navigate normally,” Dorian pointed out. “Ellana could benefit from someone distracting the Orlesian court while she searches for Corypheus’ assassins.”

Leliana had undoubtedly influenced Carver’s clothing for the night. He had been allowed a sleeveless black turtleneck under his attire. *However*, what would have been a normal crimson dress uniform that fell to mid-thigh like Carver had been expecting was instead a stand-up collared vest that fell to his waist and wouldn’t stretch closed over his chest despite his best efforts. Subtle, tasteful embroidery lined the vest in spun gold. It was undoubtedly luxurious like the deep blue sash Carver had wrapped around his waist over his vest and cinched in place with a tied leather belt. Still, the quality didn’t change the fact that Carver was entering a ball with *exposed arms*.

Solas motioned to Carver’s arm in a sling. “Sleeveless clothes are easier to remove in your condition.”

Bull snorted. “I’m sure that’s exactly what Orlais’ nobility will think when they see him.”

Carver slapped a hand over his face, cheeks burning. He would’ve felt more confident wearing what he had seen the other Inquisition guests in before they had all boarded Lord Esmeral’s carriages and left for the Winter Palace. While the Inquisition’s colours were scarlet, charcoal grey, and green due to Ellana, no one displayed every colour at once and was allowed to accessorize with other colours.

Garrett and Junior wore coal doublets and red ascots that resembled Garrett’s finery from Duke Prosper’s hunting party. Fur lined the collar of Cullen’s maroon jerkin and chain brooches clasped it shut. Varric had managed to negotiate for an imitation of his princely merchant formal wear, though Josephine’s seamstresses had produced a form-fitting and devastatingly flattering pattern. Cole and Bull were both clad in black doublets layered with gold lace and a gold sash, while Solas wore understated burgundy formal wear in comparison without much embellishment at all.

Dorian practically *sparkled* in an olive green ensemble that resembled his usual garments, save for the fact his toga was collarless to expose his nape and his clothes were bejewelled with what had to be *imitation* diamonds. Otherwise, Carver had to question Dorian's "modest" wealth as a runaway heir if he could enchant rocks into crystals. A golden mirage of dragons leapt up from the hems of his outfit and toga, which was held in place by a leather belt inlaid with glittering... *lyrium* patterns? The idea of the precious resource serving as decoration felt more excessive than gold and ironically reminded Carver of Orzammar. Alistair and Thom were paradoxically wearing what Carver had originally envisioned the Inquisition would don for the ball: a dress uniform, though theirs was Warden blue and silver with griffons across their chests.

The men overall could pass as normal attendees of a ball compared to Carver. He would have even accepted the women's outfits. Cassandra and Sera had opted to pair their finery with breeches, where a charcoal grey silk blouse highlighted Cassandra's sharp features and Sera could freely move in her red halter doublet and arm warmers. Ellana wore a padded, collared keyhole dress that trailed down to her ankles over a pair of knee-high heeled boots, such that she inspired a vision of willow trees swaying in the wind. Fiona had declined Josephine's gifts and instead sought to highlight her position as Grand Enchanter by attending the peace talks in her Circle robes.

Of course, that was the limit of Carver's comfort level. Vivienne resembled an alluring drop of poison in her emerald cold-shoulder gown while Leliana had donned a spring green dress with a bouffant skirt, the former woman setting a trend as the latter nailed the current one. Josephine herself wore a floral, Venetian red silk dress with puffed sleeves over a high-necked chemise. Elissa dragged light around her in velvet brocade dyed Warden silver, its hanging sleeves revealing navy griffon feathers sewn into its lining. Carver would likely die tripping in such outfits.

Not that he'd leave the charcuterie table once he arrived at the ball, even if his limp was disappearing.

Similar to the march to Adamant, the Inquisition traveled to the Winter Palace in a sectioned train of carriages, where Ellana rode with her advisors in the third carriage while Carver sat in the last. For Ellana's safety, Carver had pushed for her to not ride the first carriage in case of an ambush, and fortunately Leliana had managed to convince Cullen to heed his advice. Maric's Shield bore responsibility over the royal family's security, after all, and they hadn't lost a royal

so far.

When Carver's carriage arrived at the palace's Emerald Crown entrance, the Inquisition and Wardens' attendees were already passing through the palace doors. Mingling nobles in the entrance's courtyard spared one look at Bull's horns, Solas' ears, and Dorian's obviously Tevinter-inspired finery, and avoided Carver's party like the plague. The four of them walked a clear path across the courtyard, up marble steps, and through the palace doors into a vestibule where Josephine patiently awaited despite the fact she had ridden with Ellana.

Carver's brow rose. "You checked over us before we left."

The Inquisition's chief diplomat tightened the laces of Bull's doublet closed over naked skin. "Yes, but I knew some of you would try disappointing me once I turned my back."

Bull's voice sweetened. "Your request is an insult to my rich Qunari heritage."

"You'll not prance around *shirtless*." Josephine cast Dorian a look. "Are you not inclined to watch out for him?"

The mage turned smug. "I care little for what he wears and have greater appreciation for what's underneath."

Josephine immediately tutted. "Rule number six."

"*No dirty jokes at the ball*," Bull and Dorian morosely recited, watching Josephine gracefully flit back to Ellana's side. "This will be a nightmare."

Dorian hastily glanced Carver's way, conscious of his word choice, but the latter brushed his concerns off. "At least we'll be ignored standing next to Ellana." At a glimpse of fluttering fans and coy looks, Carver realised he had spoken too soon and swiftly pivoted back out for the courtyard.

Just as quickly, Solas cut off his retreat. "Ah ah."

Dorian looped an arm around Carver's good one, grinning. "Rule number one: *smile*."

Carver glanced at the masked nobles who had been staring at his neck and arms, and felt his heart stop when they straightened upon meeting his gaze. Carver quietly hissed as Dorian steered him across the

vestibule for the ballroom doors. “They’ll think I want to talk to them!”

“Then *talk*,” Solas dryly suggested.

Florianne had chosen to host the peace talks between her brother and cousin in the palace’s guest wing, though walls of tapestries and fresh gold leaf gilding every corner displayed an attempt at setting up a venue that the Council of Heraldry deserved. The Grand Game was essentially a battle royale between every living soul in Orlais for the title of biggest badass, and the Council was the *final* arbiter on *all* title disputes in Orlais. Even the late Justinia who had been reputed as one of the Game’s best players recognised that anyone able to secure and survive their position in the Council was a superior player. Thus, *every* figure of import in Orlais had stuffed themselves into the guest wing for the night to criticise the “modest” venue, drink Florianne’s champagne, and not participate in the peace talks until they saw an advantage for themselves.

Rumours caught like wildfire — that the royal wing was sealed due to Celene’s impulsive renovation of it in the middle of an expensive war, or due to Gaspard having fired trebuchets at the royal wing in an assassination attempt that was merely Orlesian for “I hate you, cousin.” Before the Inquisition and Wardens’ attendees reached the ballroom doors, Carver heard a dozen variations of the same truth.

In that moment, a greying man prowled into focus, walking in-step with Ellana to murmur in a deep voice as rich as his clothing.

“My friend,” Gaspard welcomed. “Word out of the Western Approach says you battled a demon army. Imagine what the Inquisition could accomplish with the full support of the rightful emperor of Orlais.”

Ellana’s head angled his way. “Remind me *which* one holds this position again?”

Gaspard’s chuckle was gravelly and self-assured.

It was hard to resist the duke’s merited confidence. Compared to Carver whose captaincy in Maric’s Shield had been a battlefield promotion, Gaspard had risen as a full-fledged chevalier at the same age. A rare combination of talent and natural charisma meant that Gaspard was perfectly loved *and* feared by his subordinates as he led Orlais’ defence against Nevarra’s invasion, yet while he and Celene had been trained in the arts of the Game by the same teacher, Gaspard harboured little patience for politicking. He observed a chevalier code

of honor with his opponents and saw Celene's current attempts at appeasing Navarra as a betrayal of his and his soldiers' efforts. If not for expansionist sentiments Gaspard shared with Orlais' conservative faction and for the fact Gaspard was genuinely racist, Carver wouldn't have minded his grasp of the throne. Unfortunately, Carver stood on Ferelden's side.

Carver could still acknowledge Gaspard's skills and character — and taste, as he caught a glimpse of the duke through the crowd. A low-cut auburn wyvern hide allowed Gaspard's deep teal doublet to breathe, upon which draped the golden filigree of a Verchiel livery collar. Clay-coloured fur lined a sash across Gaspard's body where a fox tail fell over his shoulder, drawing eyes to his copper lion mask. With Carver straining to see Gaspard, he nearly missed the obvious that Gaspard was remarkably average in height, and not an intimidating tallness like his magnetism suggested.

"You know better than I the purpose of this occasion," Ellana continued. "Which ruler do you see me supporting tonight?"

Ushers opened the ballroom doors in unison, and the crowded party strode through as Gaspard chivalrously lifted Ellana's hand to his lips. "Why, the charming, handsome one of course."

Ellana eyed him critically, before demurely squeezing his hand once at the wordless invitation, and Gaspard led her to the ballroom floor where they engaged in a waltz.

As the herald of the ball announced the new arrivals, the rest of the Inquisition and Warden guests fell in line for a dance that would carry them across the room to the dais presenting Florianne — the host — and Celene — the empress who mustn't be ignored in any social setting. If one wished to be formally introduced in the ball, one had to enter the dance floor. Naturally, Sera vanished the instant she passed through the ballroom's doors, and a look from Dorian restrained Bull from casually lumbering off. Dances were in pairs, of course. Determined to push through the introductions, certain characters swallowed their reservations and formed what Orlesian society called "familial" pairs, such as Garrett with Junior, and Vivienne with Fiona.

At the back of the queue, Carver glanced at Solas and dropped a sotto voce remark. "They're just talking. The Duke falls short of Ellana's taste."

Solas maintained a placid expression. "She needn't pose as his

*companion.*”

“You didn’t have to pose as a servant,” Carver returned. “Don’t miss this opportunity to dance with her in a ball.”

The pause meant Solas was considering his true feelings *and* Carver’s advice. Perhaps tonight was the time for miracles.

Carver blinked. “You’ve spoken to her in the Fade.”

“...Yes.”

“And?”

No wonder Solas seemed slightly off — he was *confused*. “She kissed me.”

“So will you two dance?”

“...Mayhaps later, privately.”

“You never struck me as shy.”

“Later after foiling an *assassination*,” Solas deadpanned, “and regardless of platonic or romantic context, I’m not shy. I was in fact hot-headed as a youth.”

Carver muttered under his breath. “Not much has changed.”

“What was that?”

“I said you’re annoying,” Carver minutely raised his voice.

Josephine shot Carver a look that meant he wasn’t speaking quietly enough. Or more likely, that he should cease speaking altogether. The herald of the ball then noted Josephine at the edge of the dance floor and recited a scroll in his hands, announcing hers and Thom’s presence and sweeping them away from Carver with convenient timing. He quirked a brow as Josephine obviously enjoyed her dance with Thom. The warden’s wholesome courtship of the lady since joining the Inquisition must have endeared him into a modest friendship.

Carver pointedly limped to the herald’s side and Solas held his free arm as support for good measure, permitting them to skip past the dance straight for Florianne and Celene.

“Ser Gavin Carver of Lothering!” the herald of the ball presented. “Captain of Maric’s Shield, veteran of the Fifth Blight, Wolfsbane, Dragonslayer, saviour of Redcliffe, and honoured friend of Orzammar!”

The herald flatly continued, “Solas, the Lady Inquisitor’s elven serving man.”

The ballroom erupted in hushed whispers as Carver quelled the urge to shoot Leliana and Josephine a *look* across the dance floor. Without his consent, the Inquisition truly intended to use him as a decoy from their investigation, considering any *Orlesian* with two brain cells to rub together could deduce that certain titles corresponded with certain *bardic* songs. He suspected Leliana had also written his introduction to clearly indicate to the Inquisition and Wardens that Carver was still the hero that had been helping them all this time. When Carver and Solas arrived at Celene and Florianne’s dais, he caught the empress’ lips curl with more genuine pleasure. Fortunately, at the same time Carver managed to gracefully hobble across a palace dance floor, Ellana and Gaspard’s waltz had concluded.

“Grand Duke,” Celene greeted, “we are always honoured when your presence graces our court.”

Gaspard scoffed. “Waste not my time with pleasantries, Celene. We have business to conclude.”

“We will meet for the negotiations after we have seen to our other guests,” Celene continued in her royal *we*. “Inquisitor, allow us to present our cousin, the Grand Duchess of Lydes, without whom this gathering would never have been possible.”

Florianne turned towards them like a pale wallflower. “An unexpected pleasure. I wasn’t aware the Inquisition and representatives of the Wardens would contribute to our festivities.” She sullenly departed from the dais.

Celene smoothly recovered. “The Lady Inquisitor’s arrival at court is like a cool wind on a summer’s day. How do you find Halamshiral?”

To her credit, Ellana didn’t betray discomfort at the family’s clear dissonance. “No words can suffice this palace’s *many beauties*, Your Majesty. I can’t do them justice.”

Celene wasn’t the only woman in the ballroom visibly flattered. The previously tense atmosphere brightened, and one couldn’t miss that



Ellana's praise also applied to Florianne, softening the duchess' curt reception of the Inquisitor.

"Your modesty does you credit," the empress returned the compliment. "Feel free to enjoy the pleasures of the ballroom, Grand Duke, my lady."

The room seemed to breathe at the dismissal, and Carver stole his opportunity to escape the honour of following up Gaspard and Ellana's introduction. Yet when Gaspard turned away from the dais, he came face-to-face with Carver.

The latter stepped aside. "Commander."

The two of them held eye contact through the holes of Gaspard's mask, before the duke snarled like his house's sigil and strode off.

Ellana followed Carver and Solas to the side of the venue. "He truly despises Fereldans."

"Ah," Carver cleared his throat, "this was a tad more personal for him."

The woman's brow flicked up. "You two know each other?"

"We were never officially introduced," Carver quickly corrected. "We briefly met – if it could be called that – in Ostagar."

"Just as the knightly song goes," Ellana realised. "You sent Orlesian chevaliers running with one shake of your head." She watched Carver splutter despite the formal setting. "Is it not true?"

Carver resisted running a hand down his face. "More than that happened, but if we must speak factually, then yes: I shook my head, and Gaspard and his chevaliers retreated from Ferelden."

"The night is still young." Solas subtly gestured to Elissa and Alistair greeting Celene, drawing the entire room's fascination with the meeting. Even guests with masks implying support for Gaspard unabashedly navigated closer to listen in and peek at the Hero of Ferelden. "By its end, mayhaps the Grand Duke will loathe all Fereldans on principle."

## Chapter End Notes

I want so badly to cover the full clash and dynamic of Orlesian

culture with each member of the Inquisitor's circle, but then these chapters would be soooo much longer and filled with fluff. There must be a lot of fanfics out there already covering how Bull behaves in the Winter Ball, taking advantage of Orlesian prejudices as a spy while letting anything he doesn't like slide off his back — or how "I ran out of arrows making them pay, then it didn't matter" Sera, avenger of the little people, handles the ball — or how Vivienne and Fiona would verbally dance and fence with Orlais' canonically most influential figures all in one room for their vision for the Circle, experiencing varying success in their attempts because while they're both Orlesian, only Vivienne is practised in the Game——

Ugh, I'm going to end up writing a oneshot covering this, aren't I.

I won't link everyone's finery, but Ellana's formal wear is inspired by this "[enchanted armour](#)." I tried to dress everyone *slightly* based on their backgrounds while still remaining in the realm of what's acceptable in Orlais. Josephine, for example, is inspired by Renaissance Italy, while Dorian dons a variation of the toga picta, a garment meant to be dyed solid purple (where promagistrates' togas were bordered purple) and decorated with imagery in gold thread. In comparison, Ellana has to don clothes that don't honour her background at all; I'm sure the Dalish have their own version of formal wear (think of the weddings!), but for court approval, Ellana can't wear it. >:/

## **!Game spoilers!**

Given the amount of investigation — and fighting — the Inquisitor and their party members do in the Winter Ball, I don't believe they literally swap between formal wear and armour for the occasion. It seems time-wasting, and any Orlesian worth their salt would notice the Inquisitor and their friends appearing increasingly rumpled from changing clothes as the night wears on. There's also a high possibility of an earring going missing in restricted areas, etc.

I figured the Inquisitor would instead wear something that can conceal the barest minimum of armour and any evidence they collect during their investigation. (There'll be *no* halla statues in this fic. It makes zero sense for plot items and Varric to be hidden behind doors that can only be unlocked with rare items. Where did Varric get his statues? Where did the other guests who chat with Varric get theirs? Seems like a security oversight.) Similarly,

bloody and shield-less fighters like Bull and Cole — and just to be safe, Garrett and Junior — are wearing black to this ball. It's easier to spray cologne than hide blood stains.

# Kingmaker

## Chapter Notes

IRL hasn't let up, but I was able to make time to kinda forget some issues via writing this. "Kinda," because Hollywood Studios' WGA strike [endgame](#) is to let writers go broke before resuming talks in the fall. I'm not a professional creative writer (obviously) but I *am* in the writing industry, and boy howdy *I hate corporations more every day*. I can *see* the impact of these events. It's hard enough asking to be paid what you earn, and these events have reminded me that I'm lucky to get paid at all. I've been told that I only have a job that's "easy to pick up" because "no one else wants to do it or has time to do it" or because "AI hasn't caught up yet." >:( I have so many thoughts on this right now.

Also, apparently [Google might start scraping the contents of Google Docs, etc. to feed its algorithms and improve AI writing](#). This includes creative writing. So I'm in the midst of moving ALL my docs (including my fanfic) from Google to iCloud. Time will tell if this is the right decision.

Anyway, sorry for the rant. To reduce the number of things I'm juggling, I'm going to upload only to AO3 for now. Once I can catch a moment to breathe, I'll get FFN and SB up to date.

Thanks for your patience everyone, and here's a longer chapter than usual again!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I told you we should have worn the silver brocades. Maker's breath! We look like every other fool here!"

"Would you calm down? You look magnificent."

Carver and Solas passed a muted argument between a male couple on their way to a secluded corner of the ball – wherever one might be found. With the venue bursting with nobles, justices, their significant others, and *their* own paramours, the ball's staff barely had space of their own to navigate.

Carver glanced back to note a man in gold and blue finery more exquisite than even the general attendee approach one half of the

male couple and pleasantly smile. Cyril de Montfort had reason to entertain greater confidence than usual. After the late Duke Prosper's passing, his son had inherited his position in the Council of Herald's. A vacuous socialite, Cyril must have had the devil's luck to be able to keep his position without falling victim to the Game, though Carver knew Celene had a hand in the spendthrift's survival. The Empress had undoubtedly conveyed to Cyril her disappointment in Prosper's betrayal against her, and had impressed upon Cyril her hopes that the young man wouldn't follow in his father's footsteps – lest Celene conjure a social death upon Cyril.

In a ball where the Council of Herald's unquestionably occupied the top of society's pyramid over even royalty, Cyril must have felt like a celebrity. For a night, he could feel unburdened by his political chains. In comparison, Vivienne drew the crowd *towards* her as the mistress of Duke Bastien de Ghislain – a member of the Council of Herald's – and the formal Enchanter to the Imperial Court, meaning Vivienne had all the influence yet none of the personal power. Madame de Fer bore the reality with poise.

In the shadow of a golden lion statue, Carver and Solas settled out of foot traffic to be physically ignored, lest a guest be accused of clogging an informal path just to approach the two of them. The assumption quickly failed with a cluster of palace guards – of all attendees – filling Carver's sight.

“Is it true what they say about Adamant?” a palace guard unreservedly gushed through their silver mask. “Did you and the Lady Inquisitor slay a demon the size of a mountain in the Fade?”

Carver froze in place while he felt Solas steal a concerned look at him. “...I dare say Commander Cullen would better clarify the battle's details.”

“But you're, tu vois – *him*,” another palace guard emphasised, “**Carver.**”

Enthusiastic nods rippled.

Rule number five: *no sighing*. Josephine should have added another rule: *no trauma-induced moments of panic*.

Surrendering to his role as a distraction, Carver hid trembling fingers and allowed polite, censored answers to flow out of him until his throat was parched. Luckily, the palace guards and the occasional battle-tested noble unrepentantly occupied Carver's attention, giving

no chance for the ball's more frilled attendees to steal a glimpse of Carver either paling or blushing while he answered prodding questions and praise. He was miserable. Even when Solas managed to deflect or completely send away guests with respectfully *cutting* – borderline *insulting* – questions or remarks that Carver encouraged, the crowd only began to slim towards the bottom of the hour.

When Carver's listeners finally dissipated with the call of duty or the dance floor, he noticed masks still angled in his and Solas' direction. The ball's colourful crowd seemed to constantly shift like a mirage or a kaleidoscope. Between overlapping shapes, Carver caught sight of a familiar face he wouldn't have otherwise noticed.

Carver turned to Solas. "You want any canapés?"

The weary mage's attention flicked to the charcuterie table down the hall. "Perhaps later. However, I won't decline a glass of port."

Carver threaded the needle of Orlais' moving crowd for the table – still within sight of Solas per Carver's probation, but not from a clear angle or unobscured by ambient chatter. The food spread spilled across two banquet tables pushed together, and Carver contemplatively raked through a dizzying variety of hor d'oeuvres to fill his silver plate with. A slightly shorter presence joined him.

"Ser de Chevin," Carver murmured in the Orlesian form of address without looking.

"Ser Carver," Michel returned. "Parlez-vous orlésienne?"

"Only Common, I'm afraid." Carver delicately shovelled a thumb-sized work of cupcake art onto his plate. "You have a message from Celene."

Undoubtedly, three of Celene's ladies-in-waiting were similarly delivering a message to Ellana at this moment. The Empress couldn't afford the court witnessing her directly approaching a guest unless she intended to be seen with them.

"The Postboy has been...*silent* since Adamant," Michel tactfully phrased. "Many preparations have gone into tonight."

Considering Leliana had been the one handling Carver's mail, he had communicated with the Postal Service in code through Anora, whom no one expected to be connected to the largely Antivan network. Even if Leliana hadn't been peeking at Carver's mail, however, his wariness

had demanded he limit his interactions with Val Royeaux. At the very least, Anora must have updated Celene and Briala on Carver's "identity" and the fact he had survived Adamant.

"The plan hasn't changed," Carver assured. "The Council of Herald's emissary?"

"Escorted by my master's palace guards," Michel confirmed, voice subtly wavering. "No one would dare touch the Council on this night."

Carver understood the champion's bewilderment over Florianne's conjectural guilt. As the royally influential yet most unexceptional flower of Orlais, the meek Florianne was everyone's last suspect for treason, much less cold-hearted cleverness. In a certain timeline, she would have faked a coded message to one of Briala's agents, sent the agent to "investigate" Florianne's childhood room under construction in the royal wing, and sent a harlequin to kill the agent. This would have enraged Briala and implicated Gaspard, as the agent had died in his sister's room. At the same time, Florianne's venatori contacts would have covertly killed the Council of Herald's emissary with a dagger bearing the de Chalons crest on its hilt, implicating that Gaspard had armed Tevinter assassins and snuck them into the palace. Finally, when Briala would have been incentivised to take Gaspard's life, the Venatori would assassinate Celene and frame the elves, leaving Briala and Gaspard to war and kill each other. As the last man standing, Florianne would have become the rightful ruler of Orlais.

"No *true Orlesian* would, no," Carver agreed. If Celene was sparing part of her security for the emissary, the equivalent of a dozen palace guards had to fill the gap in her protection. Or, one martial genius. "Watch Celene's back."

Michel stepped away with a flute of champagne. "I always do."

Carver turned away from the charcuterie tables with a loaded plate and a glass of port, snatching pockets of conversation as he headed for Solas' side.

"If you could persuade the Empress to lighten her response to the work strikes...."

"The Empress listens to you...."

"Walk into my teahouse in the Summer Bazaar anytime, you won't have to wait in line...."

“Before the night’s over, mayhaps the lady ambassador could present the aristocracy’s pleas to Orlais’ true ruler....”

CRASH.

“Oh!” A woman regretfully wiped Carver down of food and port. “My apologies, monsieur, allow me to clean you of stains.”

Briala hooked an arm around Carver’s and wilfully directed them out of the crowd for a secluded powder room. Carver caught sight of Solas wordlessly protesting Briala’s abduction of his charge before the crowd naturally walled him off, while elven servants hastily cleared the floor of the plate and wine glass that Briala had flipped onto Carver.

“Ser Carver.”

“Ambassador,” Carver whispered as they moved nearly faster than his limp could keep up. He recognised the coordination between Briala’s accident and the servants’ response. “I thought you and your spies would remain out of tonight’s festivities.”

“A dozen noble houses practically *begged* me to attend the peace talks,” Briala drawled. “Besides, my agents need to keep a clear path to the courtyard for the Inquisition, or will your friends lockpick every door in their way?”

“Florianne’s room—”

“My people have been instructed to avoid the royal wing like the blight,” Briala reassured. “Grant me this moment of reprieve from my suffocating fans. If not for an honourably injured soldier like you nearby, I would have had to risk lowering the court’s opinion of a random graceless mug.”

“So I’m the sacrifice.”

“They *adore* you.” Briala’s lips quirked under her mask. “Tonight would have been hours straight of standing around, staring at each other. You’re the entertainment. The staring is less political.”

“But they don’t *approve* of me.”

“Not entirely, no. Not as much as they would someone who defeated the Blight.” Briala subtly jerked her head Elissa’s direction as they disappeared into a vacant powder room. “The Hero is less Fereldan,



more Warden in their eyes. Ah. Which is why you're using her as a distraction."

"She's mourning her warden-commander and the lives lost in Adamant," Carver corrected. "This ball is a distraction for *her*."

Briala grabbed towels with a higher thread count than the number of candles in the ball. "Would a Cousland enjoy this occasion?"

"After the Rebellion, the Couslands had served the Crown in travelling to Orlais and reforging ties," Carver reminded, helping her wipe him down of icing and wine. He looked like he had suffered literal death by sugar. "Teyrn Bryce had at one point even been mistaken for King Cailan. Elissa doesn't share my countrymen's deeper feelings against Orlais."

Since joining the Wardens, Elissa had encountered few chances to exercise her noble upbringing, and Alistair couldn't tear his eyes away from her on the dance floor. Elissa was obviously equally enamoured. They had never been able to have a wedding.

Briala hummed. "Her company has hazel brown-green eyes."

Carver swallowed, recalling that Elissa and Alistair had shared a carriage with Cole and Fiona, and even now Alistair was avoiding Fiona by staying on the dance floor. Briala *would* naturally catch on faster than any smooth-ear present. Still, she couldn't know that Fiona had grown close with Maric in her time as a warden.

"Celene's family has hazel brown-blue eyes," Carver pointed out.

Briala scoffed. "Unsurprising, given Orlais once encompassed most all of southern Thedas, including the Free Marches. If only Gaspard would believe a Fereldan turnip and an elven savage if they told him the possibility that green eyes also lay hidden in his blood. His face would be priceless."

"How did he react to the truth of Inquisitor Ameridan?"

"Only a little better than he did news of Lady Herald Lavellan."

"Well, he isn't as pious as Celene."

"Of course, Gaspard is a brute."

"Don't insult dogs."

The two of them shared amused looks and deemed Carver's finery as clean as could be, when a servant suddenly slipped into the powder room with confidence, before freezing at the sight of Carver.

"Ambassador—"

Briala gestured. "Speak freely."

The servant cleared their throat, eyeing the only human present with visible confusion. "Our contact with the Dalish barely made it out in time."

Briala frowned. "Did he say what they were after?"

"Something about a well. He was almost incoherent after the attack."

Carver's head snapped to Briala in alarm. "Tell Clan Ghilain to relocate out of the Arbour Wilds – to Frostback Basin, if they have to. The Stonebears won't mind new neighbours. Your people would do well to stay out of the red Templars' business in the Wilds until the Inquisition has neutralised it."

The servant warily stared at Briala's quick nod, before the ambassador turned. "Anything else?"

The servant hesitated.

"*Tawen*."

"Briala," the servant prodded, "who is this human?"

The Postboy. Obviously, for the safety of Carver's followers, Briala couldn't say as much. "Did you hear anything else?"

Tawen's brows furrowed. "My cousin in the Envers Mining Company discovered an unconscious elven Templar in the Western Approach. No one seemed to have been looking for him. As you know, the only Templars around are the red ones, the ones in the Free Marches, or those serving the Inquisition." Meaning the Inquisition must have failed to check on one of its own due to racism.

Carver ignored the silent accusation. "Did the Templar bear a flaming sword, or a flaming eye?"

Tawen frowned. "What's the difference?"

"Where did the Envers Mining Company find him?"

“North of the Abyssal Reach,” Tawen snapped. “Why—?”

“What’s the Templar’s name?”

Tawen clicked his tongue, but Briala jerked her chin. “...Pharamond, I believe. Again, *why?*”

Carver pivoted, softly cursing, before he covertly mouthed to Briala, “*A Seeker.*”

The woman subdued a groan, unconcerned with arcane matters. “Move Pharamond to an Inquisition base camp.”

“He’s already awake,” Tawen revealed, “says he won’t talk to anyone but a Hand of the Divine.”

Briala sharply exhaled. “Is he not aware we currently *lack* a Divine?”

“It’s alright,” Carver placated, “he’ll accept rest in an Inquisition camp once told Seeker Cassandra and Sister Leliana stand with it. I’ll handle this.”

Briala shot him a look that conveyed, “you better.” Briala’s spy network existed for elves in Orlais, nowhere near touching the Postal Service’s *diverse* interests.

Once the servant departed from the powder room, Briala and Carver waited a beat before following suit. Carver lowered his voice. “I’m being closely monitored by the Inquisition. Don’t expect to hear directly from the Postboy for the next several weeks.”

They briefly met gazes before parting for separate ends of the ball, where Dorian and Bull immediately found Carver and dragged him to where Solas was searching for him.

“I didn’t think someone as tall as you would be easy to miss,” Dorian remarked. “Have you been stabbed?”

“Not today,” Carver dryly replied. “This is wine.”

“Shame,” Dorian sighed, bored. “I might sample some myself.”

Once he handed Carver back to Solas, Dorian slipped away and left a ripple of Orlesians wrinkling their noses in the altus’ wake. Bull obediently waited for him next to Carver and Solas – to Carver’s immense thankfulness, upon catching sight of Fifi and Babette de Launcet in the crowd. The presence of the Hawke family’s

opportunistic counterpart promised to ruin any social experience they participated in, as if the overstuffed Orlesian night wasn't draining enough. Carver also noted Ellana, Cassandra, and Sera's absence from the ball and willed it to not show on his face, conscious of the fact that with Cole's assistance, they were likely skulking around beyond the ball's venue.

Thom joined the three of them with a glass of port that Solas gratefully accepted.

"Hey Thom, Carver," Bull piped up. "What's the most limbs you've ever cut off of something in one swing?"

Thom straightened, aware that he was representing the Wardens even as no one engaged them in conversation. "Battle is a sacred duty, a vigil kept to guard the world against destruction. It's not a game."

Bull nodded. "Right. Same here."

"...Do heads count?"

"Heads absolutely count."

Thom frowned. "Then...three."

"Nice!" Bull declared, shrinking the crowd one more step away from them. "Down on the collarbone and through, right? That's how I get the good ones. How about you, Carver?"

Should he really? "...Five."

Thom choked. "Maker's breath, don't say it was a dragon you eviscerated."

"A nightmare demon," Carver deadpanned, "the Aspect you all faced in Adamant Fortress. I chopped off half of its spider legs and human arms in one blow." He squinted at the dance floor. Was that...?

"The Empress' arcane advisor," Solas supplied, following his gaze. "Like numerous other guests tonight, she's keen on occupying the Champion of Kirkwall's time."

Morrigan was intently speaking with Garret, Junior, and Varric, then Elissa and Alistair as they joined them. Carver doubted the Tale interested Morrigan past the first chapter – where Varric had reported that Flemeth yet lived, *Maker's breath*. When the group of six glanced

Carver's way across the room, he shrank into his collar, averting his gaze to instead watch nobles bribing and pleading to Briala in equal measure, desperate for an end to elven strikes and protests. Further past her, Cullen evidently didn't have to expose his arms to attract the admiration of Orlais' *entire nobility*. With his curly hair, faintly scarred lip, and contrastingly innocent features, Cullen truly didn't have to exert any effort.

Now *that* was a pretty boy.

Carver's cruel satisfaction nearly distracted him from a sudden racket consuming the centre of the ballroom. Ellana eventually surfaced from it and made a beeline for the less crowded space Bull had carved out for their group, leaving fluttering fans in her path.

Dorian excitedly found his way to them. "Were you dancing with *Duchess Florianne*?"

Ellana exhaled deeply, longingly eyeing Solas and Dorian's drinks. "She was wearing daggers under her dress."

Bull chuckled. "*Someone* felt their way through a waltz."

"I thought Josephine had been joking," Ellana lamented, throwing Bull a dry look at his breach of rule number six. "Orlesians *are* literally armed with sharp words, blades, or both. Thom, Dorian, Bull – you're coming with me next. Duchess Florianne implied we'd find mercenaries hired by Gaspard in a nearby deserted courtyard. Your deductions have also mostly been off so far, Carver, save for the bit about an elven locket."

Carver shrugged. "Solas and I will just wait here."

"Save me a dance." Ellana's eyes sparkled Solas' way, before she and her party vanished into the vestibule.

Carver's lips quirked at Solas' startled expression. "Looks like she beat you to it."

X

With her venatori allies neutralised by the Inquisition and her crimes publicly exposed to Orlais' greatest figures of import, Florianne crumbled like a house of cards in the palace guards' arms. The crowd parted, making way for Florianne's disgraced escort from the ball and for Ellana as she drew Orlais' leaders outside to a balcony. Carver, the

Wardens, and a few of Ellana's companions followed, the rest joining Celene's palace guards in closing the balcony off for privacy.

Celene murmured to Carver in the midst of the *chaotic* relocation to a balcony. "You're in pain."

Physically, not entirely true. Emotionally? "My arm's healing from a hairline fracture."

They were disguising their steps together as part of the party's flow. Given the night's dramatic revelations, spirited exclamations and remarks had consumed the party and the ball's other guests. Even Gaspard and Briala were already exchanging tense accusations outside of the privacy of a secured balcony. The din concealed Celene and Carver's conversation. They subdued instinctive body language from each other, including what Carver sensed was Celene's natural desire to glance at his sling. If mages hadn't evidently addressed his wounds from Adamant with dedication, Carver wouldn't have risked entering a crowded space.

He nearly lost Celene's whisper to the surrounding noise. "We thought you reluctant to attend tonight's peace talks. You practically fell off the face of Thedas after Adamant."

Carver had been confined to a room with only letters as his form of communication, had been unable to step out without likely drawing Bull or Cullen's attention, had seen Junior only once, and *still* hadn't read the signs until Ellana had assigned a 24/7 tail on him. Garrett was keeping Junior away from Carver. The majority of Ellana's advisors, her companions, Elissa, and Alistair must have wanted him isolated, as a democratic vote would have demanded it so.

Carver was a caged bird.

It took him a moment to realise Celene hadn't been using the royal we. She and Briala, used to subterfuge, had interpreted Carver's silence as a burning desire to either not involve himself with them anymore, or to go unnoticed leading up to the ball. Fortunately for the fate of Orlais, Celene and Briala had chosen the latter interpretation.

Cold sweat lined Carver's hairline. "Briala will explain." That he was being closely monitored. Such a tame description of his true circumstances.

Celene hummed. "You detest attention. Unfortunately, another of your mythical images floating around will only gain traction with tonight's

events, much like the evolving tales of the Black Fox.”

“Am I a folk hero now?”

“You have been for a while,” Celene drawled, “...kingmaker.”

Despite his poor mood, Carver choked, intently whispering, “I had no influence on your ascension to the throne! I wasn’t even *born* yet!”

The hazel blue eyes behind Celene’s mask crinkled his way. “Oh Carver, whyever would someone like you attend this ball?”

To establish Orlais’ leadership.

Carver held back a groan. “*Kingmaker* is a little....”

A gloved hand fluttered. “Unfortunately, no existing term captures your hand in Ferelden’s *army* structure, Ferelden and Kirkwall’s *noble* tapestry, and southern Thedas’ *elven* politics.”

Everyone was settled in the closed off balcony, drawing eyes to Ellana and Orlais’ three leaders. Ellana blinked at Celene’s motion. “Your Majesty, have you words to share?”

“None,” Celene demurred, raising her voice. “The Grand Duke’s fate will naturally mirror his sister’s, no?”

Gaspard clicked his tongue. “As I’ve been saying, she acted independently.”

“Every one of you is implicated,” Ellana cut in before Briala and Celene could react. “You all conspired to allow this to happen. Your Majesty, you allowed Gaspard to sneak his troops in, hoping he would make a politically foolish move.”

“Duplicitous,” Gaspard calmly accused, “even for you, Celene.”

Ellana shot him a look. “You fell for the bait and planned to strike tonight, Your Grace. I met your mercenary captain.”

Briala tittered. “As a brute does, you sought the fastest route to a goal: *being hanged for treason.*”

“Your own support will mock you, Ambassador,” Ellana revealed a locket from the confines of her dress, “when they learn you and Celene are lovers.”

Celene brightened, picking up the locket. “I thought this lost forever. What part of my quarters did you break into, Inquisitor?”

Ellana’s surprise only flashed across her face for an instant, replaced by bone-deep exhaustion. “*Everywhere*, Your Majesty. You are three,” she gestured, “of the best minds in the empire. Your people and all of Orlais would greatly benefit from you three working together.”

Gaspard scoffed. “Quote optimistic of you to assume we can work together.”

Celene folded her hands in front of her. “We, for two, are pleased. The Lady Inquisitor and her company have proven themselves high-level players at the Game. We would not ally ourselves with well-meaning fools incapable of securing power over their friends.” She turned to Ellana. “The blackmail against us is weightless, but you pass our test. We also appreciate you permanently culling Florianne’s influence as an outsider to the royal family with no ulterior motive, and *proposing* the *perfect solution* to this fractured nation.”

Ellana slowly echoed, “The perfect solution...?”

Briala nodded Carver’s way. “One party with influence — like Orlais’ elves — needs assurance that they will never experience a wrong again — like from the nobility.”

At the attention and turned heads, Carver wilted. “...The Empress and Ambassador are offering you friendship, Ellana, and so long as you have blackmail against the Grand Duke, he can’t afford to conspire against you, the Empress, or the Ambassador. Not even a little.”

Gaspard rhetorically sneered, “What would you know, Fereldan dog?”

Carver sighed. “Au contraire, I *do* have Orlesian contacts.”

Celene leaned into Briala. “After all, only altar diplomacy would have Orlais accept our marriage.”

The gears visibly turned in Gaspard’s mind. “Altar diplomacy...?”

Briala smirked. “Ha. The elves and Celene’s conflict was *Carver’s* idea.”

A beat of silence fell.

“*WHAT!?*”



Everyone erupted into exclamations, but Ellana cut through the din. “*Everyone stop talking!* You three!” She pointed at Carver, Celene, and Briala. “You’re *friends!*?”

Carver quickly interjected, “Penpals at most.”

Celene sniffed. “You would think so little of our ten-year friendship?”

“**Gavin Carver!**” Ellana snapped, and everyone’s spines reflexively straightened at the presence of clear authority. “This ball, everything! We are all. *Literally* here. ***Because of you!***”

Carver defensively pointed. “I didn’t make Gaspard rebel!”

The duke deadpanned. “Are you *serious?*”

“Completely! You started a civil war on your own!”

Alistair muttered under his breath. “Maker’s breath, Carver, actually how!?”

Elissa thought aloud. “Then...Garrett becoming Kirkwall’s viscount... Bethany becoming its first enchanter....”

Carver spluttered. “Now hold on, those were mostly accidental!”

Elissa snorted. “You seriously expect us to believe you?”

Garrett flatly added, “You’re friends with the qunari who ended up the new Arishok.”

“Hey, Arishok earned his rank on his own.”

“Garrett’s not kidding?” Ellana remarked, revealing a level of comfort she must have developed with the Hawkes during Carver’s confinement. “Maker’s breath, Carver, how many influential figures do you *know?*”

Aside, shadows spoke quietly where only Carver could hear. “There’s a Talon in the works....”

Cole, *not now*.

Elissa hesitantly raised her hand. “He’s friends with a prince of Orzammar.”

“*Former* prince,” Carver tersely corrected. “Duren’s outside the line of

succession now. Actually, I just remembered that none of this is important! We have a civil war to resolve!”

Celene sighed. “Anora does so dislike this annexation nonsense of yours, Gaspard.”

Ellana gestured. “*Queen Anora* is involved, too!? Are there any *other* contacts you’re hiding!?”

Carver slumped, resigned. It was too late to warn Celene that he had been sending coded messages for the Postal Service through Anora. “...No comment.”

“We must give a speech!” Celene revealed a silver ring, before bending to one knee. Briala gasped. “After I ask the love of my life for her hand in marriage?”

Resembling a dead fish, Gaspard gaped at his cousin and her girlfriend excitedly kissing and finding their happy ending. Ellana dryly nudged him to follow her and the two fiancées to the ballroom’s dais.

“*Lords and ladies of the court!*” Celene seized the entire ball’s attention with a breath. “We are pleased to announce that an accord has been reached. Our cousin Gaspard will now hold a place in our cabinet!”

Gaspard suddenly cut in. “And I introduce the newest member of the court: Marquise Briala of the Dales. Let the cornerstone of change be laid!”

Hazel eyes clashed across lion masks. Gaspard had stolen Celene’s thunder, tossing a rock into the pond that was Orlais to imply he was able to force Celene into a political move counter to her recent history. If he could elevate an elf to nobility, what more could he do for his allies? It didn’t matter that Celene had obviously intended to grant Briala a title.

“I am also pleased,” Gaspard smoothly continued, “to secure peace between the royal family and Orlais’ elven citizens with this promise: that my cousin Celene and Marquise Briala will be joined in the eyes of the Maker *and the Holy Andraste*.”

Gaspard the Peacemaker. For one allergic to the Game, he was frighteningly adept at playing it even from a position of weakness. Already, in the wave of dramatic news, Carver could *feel* the crowd shift at Gaspard’s display of power and humility. The Council of Heralds had been wavering towards snipping Gaspard from the line of

succession, but by dedicating Celene to Briala in an Andrastian vow of spiritual marriage, he could now secure his children's future of the throne.

While Celene stood stock-still, Briala sharply glanced Gaspard's way. Gaspard had stolen any chance of them raising his children as their own. A spiritual marriage paralleled a priest's celibate bond with the Maker – one of the strongest vows in the Andrastian faith. Breaking such vows would turn even Briala's supporters against her, no matter how Andrastian they were. The bond was symbolic and transcended man-made laws.

Briala straightened, recovering. "This is not just a victory for Halamshiral, or within the Empire, or even for elves alone. Over a thousand years ago in the Valarian Fields, elves and humans together defeated the Imperium. We can do so much more now. We are greater than our ancestors ever dreamed."

"We assembled as leaders of the Empire," Celene declared, extending her royal we to everyone before her. The crowd's distraction over Gaspard's image turned over to Celene's praise. "We must set the example for all Thedas, that we must stand united – or surely we will fall alone."

Ellana stepped forward to nods and excited murmurs of approval. "This evening proves what we can accomplish through cooperation. The Inquisition is already tracking the Tevinter agents who took the Divine and tore the sky apart."

"But that is tomorrow," Celene allowed, raising her hands. "Tonight, we celebrate our newfound fellowship!"

As the ballroom lit up with revelry, Carver sighed, dread rising from the tangled web of work ahead of him.

## Chapter End Notes

Tawen isn't the first to confuse Seekers with Templars. [Background gossip](#) in the game includes conversationalists mistakenly referring to Cassandra as a Templar, with the implication that the speakers don't know that Seekers exist or even what they are. Most likely, the common public is largely ignorant of Seekers, save for those who live in the periphery of Chantry politics.

Also, the couple in the start of this chapter are based on bits of

amusing ball background dialogue:

**Man A:** Did I see you talking to Duke Cyril de Monfort?

**Man B:** I was merely being polite. Unlike some people.

**Man A:** Don't give me that! I've seen the way he looks at you!

**Man A:** I cannot believe you danced four times with Cyril de Montfort!

**Man B:** I cannot believe you did not dance at all! You spent the entire evening drinking port and glowering like a Fereldan turnip!

**Man A:** I am not talking to you until we get home.

**Man B:** Fine by me.

In my first playthrough, this couple cracked me up. They were a breath of fresh air compared to the ball's more serious gossip.

## End Notes

Thank you for reading, and please kudos and comment!

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